

STUDIES IN POETS

J O H N K E A T S

Detailed Consideration of Selected Poems—
Love of St. Agnes and the *Odes*—with their Text]

By

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Preface

This book on the poetry of John Keats is designed to meet the examination needs of advanced students in Indian Universities. All important aspects of Keats's work have been discussed and suitable illustrations provided. The aspects that have received special attention are : (a) Keats's Development as a Poet ; (b) Keats's Love of Beauty and his Sensuousness ; (c) Keats's Treatment of Nature ; and (d) Keats's Imagery. *The Eve of St. Agnes* and the major Odes have been discussed fully under the following heads : (1) Introduction. (2) Critical Summary. (3) Critical Appreciation. (4) Explanations. Twentieth Century interpretations of these poems have also been provided in an abridged and simplified form. Other poems have received an adequate, though not detailed, consideration. For greater convenience the full text of the *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer*, and all the Odes has been included in this book.

This book has been written with the earnest hope that it will prove useful to those for whom it is meant and that it will not irritate those for whom it is not meant. The encouragement to write it has come to me from the reception accorded to my books on Browning, Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, and I would like to make the same observation about it which I previously made about each of the others : 'No originality is claimed for this work. It is not a research paper. The object was to select and co-ordinate critical material, and to present it, with suitable illustrations from the text, in an easily intelligible and assimilable form.'

RAMJI LALL

Contents

	Page
Preface	
1. Keats—A Brief Biographical Sketch	1
2. Keats's Principal Poetic Works	4
3. Some Critical Observations on Keats as a Poet	6
4. Keats's Development as a Poet	12
5. Keats's Aestheticism, Or Keats's Love of Beauty, Or Keats as a Poet of Escape	18
6. Keats's Hellenism, Or The Greek Note in Keats's Poetry	22
7. Keats's Treatment Of Nature, Or Keats As A Poet of Nature	25
8. Keats's Medievalism	30
9. Keats's Sensuousness	32
10. Keats's Pictorial Quality, Or Keats's Imagery	37
11. <i>Endymion</i>	40
12. <i>Isabella, The Eve of St. Mark, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Lamia</i>	49
13. <i>Hyperion</i> (The Two Versions)	54
14. The Great Odes of Keats	63
15. A Detailed Consideration of Selected Poems :	
I. <i>The Eve of St. Agnes</i>	70
II. <i>Ode To Psyche</i>	103
III. <i>Ode On Indolence</i>	118
IV. <i>Ode On A Grecian Urn</i>	125
V. <i>Ode To A Nightingale</i>	140
VI. <i>Ode On Melancholy</i>	162
VII. <i>Ode To Autumn</i>	171
VIII. <i>Ode To Fancy</i>	181
IX. <i>Ode To Poets</i> ("Bards Of Passion And Of Mirth")	188

	<i>Page</i>
X. Sonnet : <i>On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer</i>	... 194
16. The Lesser Odes of Keats	
1. <i>Ode To Apollo</i>	... 198
2. <i>Hymn To Apollo</i>	... 200
3. <i>To Pan</i>	... 202
4. <i>To Neptune</i>	... 205
5. <i>To Sorrow</i>	... 207
6. <i>To Diana</i>	... 213
7. <i>On A Lock Of Milton's Hair</i>	... 215
8. <i>To Maia (Fragment)</i>	... 216
9. <i>On the Mermaid Tavern</i>	... 217
10. <i>To Fanny</i>	... 219
17. Important Passages From Keats's Letters	... 222
18. Important Questions	... 224
Select Bibliography	... 227

Contents

	Page
Preface	
1. Keats—A Brief Biographical Sketch	1
2. Keats's Principal Poetic Works	4
3. Some Critical Observations on Keats as a Poet	6
4. Keats's Development as a Poet	12
5. Keats's Aestheticism, Or Keats's Love of Beauty, Or Keats as a Poet of Escape	18
6. Keats's Hellenism, Or The Greek Note in Keats's Poetry	22
7. Keats's Treatment Of Nature, Or Keats As A Poet of Nature	25
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11. <i>Endymion</i>	40
12. <i>Isabella, The Eve of St. Mark, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Lamia</i>	49
13. <i>Hyperion</i> (The Two Versions)	54
14. The Great Odes of Keats	63
15. A Detailed Consideration of Selected Poems :	
I. <i>The Eve of St. Agnes</i>	70
II. <i>Ode To Psyche</i>	103
III. <i>Ode On Indolence</i>	118
IV. <i>Ode On A Grecian Urn</i>	125
V. <i>Ode To A Nightingale</i>	140
VI. <i>Ode On Melancholy</i>	162
VII. <i>Ode To Autumn</i>	171
VIII. <i>Ode To Fancy</i>	181
IX. <i>Ode To Poets</i> ("Bards Of Passion And Of Mirth")	188

	<i>Page</i>
X. Sonnet : <i>On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer</i>	... 194
16. The Lesser Odes of Keats	
1. <i>Ode To Apollo</i>	... 198
2. <i>Hymn To Apollo</i>	... 200
3. <i>To Pan</i>	... 202
4. <i>To Neptune</i>	... 205
5. <i>To Sorrow</i>	... 207
6. <i>To Diana</i>	... 213
7. <i>On A Lock Of Milton's Hair</i>	... 215
8. <i>To Maia (Fragment)</i>	... 216
9. <i>On the Mermaid Tavern</i>	... 217
10. <i>To Fanny</i>	... 219
17. Important Passages From Keats's Letters	... 222
18. Important Questions	... 224
Select Bibliography	... 227

A Detailed Consideration of Selected Poems

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**Poems dealt with in the following pages are :**

- I. *The Eve of St. Agnes*
- II. *Ode to Psyche*
- III. *Ode on Indolence*
- IV. *Ode on a Grecian Urn*
- V. *Ode to a Nightingale*
- VI. *Ode on Melancholy*
- VII. *Ode to Autumn*
- VIII. *Ode to Fancy*
- IX. *Ode to Poets ("Bards of Passion and of Mirth")*
- X. *Sonnet : On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer.*

### **I. THE EVE OF ST. AGNES**

#### **1. Introduction**

This poem, generally recognised as one of the masterpieces of Keats, appeared in the volume of 1820. Keats wrote the poem during an illness, perhaps to amuse himself. He thought that, in writing the poem, he had done nothing worth speaking of, but the poem is full of many excellences and occupies a high rank among Keats's compositions. It is based upon a legend connected with St. Agnes.

St. Agnes was a Roman girl who suffered martyrdom for her Christian faith. She was canonized on the 21st January, 304 A.D. St. Agnes came afterwards to be regarded as the patron saint of virgins. The 21st of January is observed as St. Agnes' day, while the 20th of January is the eve of St. Agnes.

According to a legend which forms the basis of the story, a virgin, by performing certain rituals and fulfilling certain conditions on the eve of St. Agnes, could see in a dream her lover and would-be husband. The rituals and the conditions have been specified by the poet in stanza 6 of the poem. Keats has written a beautiful, romantic tale, with a theme that is reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet* because, in this tale too, Madeline and Porphyro belong to mutually hostile families. But while *Romeo and Juliet* has a tragic ending, *The Eve of S. Agnes* ends on a note of triumph for the lovers.

## 2. Critical Summary

This romantic narrative begins with a description of bitter chill on St. Agnes' eve. The owl in its nest, the hare on the grass, the sheep in their fold, and the Beadsman in the church, were all feeling benumbed with cold. Madeline's father had arranged a feast in his castle to which were invited numerous guests—knights and ladies, who came there in their magnificent dresses. The hall had been richly decorated and brilliantly illuminated to receive them and the orchestra played sweet strains of music.

Madeline, the fair maiden, who was the focus of attention for many amorous young men, was not in the least interested in the revelry. She was quite forgetful of her surroundings. She had all the day been thinking of love and the legend connected with the eve of St. Agnes. She had heard that young maidens could see visions of their lovers on St. Agnes' eve by performing certain ceremonies such as going to bed supperless, sleeping with bodies supine, and praying to heaven without looking behind or sideways. She had been brooding upon this legend because she wanted to see the vision of her lover. So she danced, quite indifferently and absent-mindedly, waiting for an opportunity to slip away from the crowd of merry-makers and retire to her bed-chamber before the mid-night hour which was sacred to St. Agnes.

Having been introduced to the heroine, Madeline, we are now introduced to the hero of the poem. Porphyro was the name of Madeline's lover. He had a secret love-affair with Madeline. He belonged to a hostile lineage. As Porphyro and Madeline belonged to mutually hostile families, they could not declare their love. The Baron, that is, Madeline's father, and the Baron's kinsmen had a fierce hatred for Porphyro. But Porphyro had made up his mind to see his beloved that night. He had come across the moors from afar, with his heart on fire for Madeline.

Porphyro entered the castle stealthily and, by a happy chance, met Angela, the old nurse who had brought up Madeline after the death of Madeline's mother. Old Angela knew of this secret love-affair, and her sympathies were with the lovers. But seeing Porphyro in the castle, she felt terrified because he had taken a great risk in coming there when the castle was full of merciless enemies and hot-blooded knights whose very dogs would have howled curses on

Porphyro's lineage. She urged him to leave the castle but he was bent upon seeing Madeline, come what might. He entreated the old woman to help him to meet his beloved by hiding him in a closet in Madeline's bed-chamber without Madeline's knowing it. At first old Angela resisted this shocking proposal. But Porphyro pressed her hard, and ultimately she agreed. Accordingly, she led him into Madeline's bed-chamber which was "hushed, silken, and chaste", and which had a triple-arched window magnificently carved and painted. There in a closet, she hid the passionate Porphyro. She also provided a variety of fruits and dainties in the chamber—candied apple, quince, plum, gourd, syrups, manna, and dates. The stanzas containing descriptions of the Gothic window and the feast of dainties have a rich sensuous appeal.

Presently came Madeline, lost in her own thoughts. Entering her bed-chamber, she closed the door and knelt to pray for heaven's grace. She looked very lovely, very innocent, very pure, as she knelt there with warm gules falling on her breast and rose-bloom on her hands. Porphyro grew faint with passion to see this image of beauty and purity. Having finished her prayer, Madeline began to undress herself. She untwined her pearls from her hair, unclasped her warm jewels, loosened her fragrant bodice, looking like a mermaid with her bodily charms half-visible and half-concealed, while Porphyro feasted his eyes upon her loveliness. Then she got into her bed and soon fell asleep. Madeline's undressing, again, has a sensuous appeal.

Porphyro now came out of his hiding-place and, placing a table close to Madeline's bed, arranged all the dainties on it. The dainties presented a most sumptuous sight. Porphyro spoke to her softly in order to wake her up but she was fast asleep, with the magic dreams of St. Agnes floating before her mind. Porphyro then picked up her lute and softly played a tune known as "The beautiful lady without mercy" close to her ears, whereupon she opened her eyes, feeling a little frightened. Finding that the sweet vision of her lover whom she had been seeing in her dream had been interrupted, she began to weep, speaking incoherent words of grief. Then she saw Porphyro in flesh and blood, kneeling by her bedside, and began to speak to him. She told him that she had been dreaming of him and that in her dreams he had looked extremely beautiful, almost heavenly, and that he had vowed everlasting love to her. At her amorous words, Porphyro became more passionate than ever and he melted into her dream, as the rose blends its odour with the violet, thus forming a sweet solution.

Meanwhile, the moon had set and a storm had begun to blow. When the ecstatic union of the lovers ended, Madeline implored her lover not to forsake her now that she was completely at his mercy. But Porphyro assured her that he would love and adore her always, and asked her to get ready to flee with him. The storm blowing outside was a great blessing to the lovers because it would facilitate their escape. Madeline hastily got ready and the two lovers noiselessly went down the stairs, and into the hall, passing through many

doors till they gained the gate. All the guests and servants were lying dead drunk and so nobody detected the eloping lovers. Noiselessly the lovers opened the gate and fled into the stormy night. That night the Baron and all his warrior-guests saw dreadful dreams of witches, demons and coffin-worms. Old Angela and the old Beadsman died that very night.

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**The medieval atmosphere of the poem.** *The Eve of St. Agnes* is the loveliest romance-poem of its time. It is a poem steeped in a medieval atmosphere. It is a tale of medieval chivalry and is based upon the medieval superstition that a maiden might win sight of her would-be husband in a dream by going to bed supperless and sleeping on her back on the eve of St. Agnes. With this, Keats has woven the motive of a love-passion between the son and daughter of hostile houses reminding us of Romeo and Juliet. As a poet of medievalism, it may be noted, Keats concentrates upon the passion rather than the adventurous action of the period. He does not make Porphyro fight with his enemies, but simply dwells upon his passion for Madeline. Porphyro came with his "heart on fire" for Madeline. He felt "entranced" on seeing his beloved undressing. He felt "half-anguished" to see her fast asleep and wished for some "drowsy Morphean amulet". Speaking to the sleeping Madeline, he said in passionate tones :

And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake !

•      Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache.

As he whispered these words, his warm and unnerved arm sank in her pillow. Madeline's words to Porphyro are also full of passion :

•      Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,  
        For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go.

Porphyro grew almost faint with love till he melted into Madeline's dream—"solution sweet". Apart from the note of passion, the poem also shows Keats's interest in medieval art. This is borne out by his references to the plume, tiara, carved angels, and the splendid Gothic window.

**Its sensuousness.** The description of the feast spread by Porphyro by the side of his sleeping mistress is richly sensuous. Candied apple, quince, plum, jellies, manna, dates, etc. appeal to our senses of taste and smell not only by their own natural richness, but by the associations of the distant countries from where they have come—Fez, Samarcand and Lebanon. The pictures of the window-panes with splendid colours like the tiger-moth's wings, and the shielded scutcheon blushing with the blood of queens and kings are perfect in their beauty of colour, and appeal to our sense of sight. The stahza containing these pictures of the Gothic window has been described as "a burst of richness, noiseless, coloured, as if a door of heaven were opened". Our senses of sight and smell are also grati-

fied when the poet refers to the wintry moon throwing its light on Madeline's fair breast and the rose-bloom falling on her hands :

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon ;  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint :

The combination of colours in these lines, as in the stanza describing the Gothic window, is delightful. Even more sensuous is the picture of Madeline undressing herself. As Madeline removes the pearls from her hair, unclasps the jewels one by one, loosens her bodice, she looks like a mermaid in sea-weed, and Porphyro thinks himself to be in paradise :

her vespers done  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees ;  
Unclasps her warm jewels one by one ;  
Loosens her fragrant boddice ; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees :

The stanza in which the poet describes the passionate love-making of Porphyro and Madeline, again, has a richly sensuous appeal. Some critics object to this stanza as being sensual rather than sensuous, but that is mere prudery:

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throb'ing star  
Seen 'mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose :  
Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
Solution sweet :

There is nothing sensual about these lines because the sexual union of the lovers is merely indicated and not described. It is words like "impassion'd", "voluptuous", "throb'ing star", "sapphire heaven", and the "rose blending its odour with the violet" which lend a rich appeal to these lines.

**Its narrative quality.** Keats begins his narrative quite appropriately, with a reference to the bitter chill. Then he gives us a picture of the merry music in the hall. Then the heroine, Madeline, is introduced to us and the possibility of a romance is hinted at so as to arouse our curiosity. Porphyro, with heart on fire, has come across the moors to see his beloved and, with the help of old Angela, hides himself in Madeline's chamber. The stage is thus set for action and excitement because we know that, if Porphyro's presence becomes known in the castle, a hundred swords will storm his heart and cut him into pieces. But we should not expect any action or thrilling adventure from Keats. He is the poet of the senses and will give us plenty of sensuous delight but not much vigour and move-

ment of plot. As Madeline enters her chamber, lost in thoughts of love, we are told that the moon threw warm light upon her fair breast. The window through which the moonlight comes is diamonded with panes and here is one of the most colourful pictures of Keats. Then Madeline is described in the act of undressing and many a young reader at this stage experiences exquisite sensations of delight. Porphyro thinks that he is in a paradise and, when Madeline has gone to sleep, he arranges a feast by her bedside. The description of this feast consisting of candied apple, quince, plums, gourd, jellies, lucent syrups, etc., is highly sensuous and makes our mouths water. Porphyro then plays a sweet melody in Madeline's ear to wake her up. Madeline opens her eyes dreamily and speaks to him in passionate tones. Porphyro also becomes passionate and melts into her dream—"solution sweet". Then the two go out of the castle into the stormy night.

Thus we find that the story in this narrative is thin. Keats lays stress upon the element of passion and fills the poem with lovely, sensuous pictures. The lover in the poem is of the swooning kind, who is overwhelmed by the very intensity of his passion. No doubt all these points do create an interest in us, but at the same time we remain somewhat unsatisfied because of the want of action, pace, and energy—qualities which we find in abundance in the narrative poems of Scott and Byron. And yet, as a coloured and romantic narrative, *The Eve Of St. Agnes* is unsurpassed.

**Its imagery.** Not only do we have sensuous images like those mentioned above, but the poet, talking even of dead and inanimate things, gives them life, movement, and feeling. The statues of knights and ladies are described as feeling very cold ; that is, the capacity for feeling cold is given to the statues. The statues are brought before us through our sympathy with the shivering fancy of the Beadsman :

Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,  
He passeth by ; and his weak spirit fails  
To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

Similarly the poet strikes life into the carved angels which are described as staring "eager-eyed". Apart from these living pictures of lifeless things, Keats gives us many more pictures which are perfect in their concreteness—the frozen breath of the old Beadsman going upward ; the hare limping through the frozen grass ; the chambers of the castle glowing to receive a thousand guests, "a little moonlight room, pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb" ; the boisterous, festive clarion ; the merry-makers drowned in wine ; the arras rich with horseman, hawk, and hound ; Porphyro and Madeline gliding like phantoms into the wide hall, the wakeful blood-hound recognising in Madeline an inmate of the castle, etc. etc.

**Its human appeal.** Although the poem is chiefly one of romantic passion, atmosphere, scenery, etc., the emotions of the

personages are well-conceived. The figure of the ancient Beadsman is finely touched. The old nurse Angela, a poor, weak, palsy-stricken "churchyard thing," is still more successfully drawn and her debate with Porphyro in her little, moonlight room, is admirably conveyed to us. Both these old persons die on the night of Madeline's elopement with Porphyro :

Angela the old  
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deformed ;  
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
Far aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

Madeline, too, though barely drawn, is exquisite, whether in her meeting with the nurse on the staircase or when she closes her chamber-door, panting with the candle gone out :

Out went the taper as she hurried in ;  
Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died :  
She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin  
To spirits of the air, and visions wide :

With equal realism is she described when she wakes up to find her lover beside her :

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,  
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep :  
There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd,  
The blisses of her dream so pure and deep  
At which fair Madeline began to weep :

Madeline's indifference towards the 'young gallants who want to dance with her in the hall is also skilfully depicted :

in vain  
Came many a tiptoe, amorous, cavalier,  
And back retir'd ; not cool'd by high disdain,  
But she saw not : her heart was otherwhere.

**Its phrases.** The poem contains many phrases of rare beauty. When Madeline removes her jewels, Keats does not describe their brilliance but gives us the phrase "warmed jewels" which breathes the very life of the wearer. When the idea of concealing himself in Madeline's chamber occurs to Porphyro, his heart makes a "purple riot"—a phrase which sums up the trembling anticipation and the love-worship with which his heart throbs. Again, Madeline sleeps an "azure-lidded sleep"—an epithet which impresses upon us the beauty of Madeline's blue eyes. Another pretty phrase is Madeline's "fragrant bodice"; and still another is her "silken, hush'd, and chaste" chamber. The innumerable stains and splendid dyes of the painted panes in the chamber-window are compared to "the tiger-moth's deep, damask'd wings"—a gorgeous phrase which gives the widest range to the colour-imagination of the reader. In the last line of the same stanza ("a shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings"), the word "blush" makes the colour seem to come and go, while the

mind is at the same time sent travelling from the maiden's chamber on thoughts of her lineage and ancestral fame.

**Unity of structure.** The poem achieves a complete unity of structure. There is nothing irrelevant or superfluous in the poem. The unity is chiefly that of atmosphere because there is not much action in the poem.

The close of the poem is in perfect harmony with its commencement. It begins with a reference to the freezing cold, while with the deaths of the old nurse and the Beadsman, once the house has lost its light or beauty, it is brought to a chill and wintry close.

**Metre.** The poem is written in the Spenserian stanza of which Keats shows himself a master. Each stanza consists of nine lines with the following rhyme-scheme :

*ab ab bc bc c.*

The ninth line is called an alexandrine. In this connection, a critic observes : "Choosing happily the Spenserian stanza, Keats adds to the melodious grace, the sweet-slipping movement of Spenser, a transparent ease and directness of construction ; and with this ease and directness combines a never-failing richness and concentration of poetic meaning and suggestion."

*The Eve Of St. Agnes* is an excellent narrative poem whose unique charm lies in its atmosphere, its glow of passionate colour and music, its decorative images, its ornamental style, its beautiful phrases. Few poets have succeeded in creating an atmosphere so dreamy, so magical, so full of beauty, so removed from the common world of our everyday experiences. Critics have disapproved of Porphyro's growing faint and his warm unnerved arm sinking in Madeline's pillow, but lovers in romantic stories have always been overcome by passion in this manner. "And we may well pardon Porphyro his weakness, in consideration of the spirit which has led him to his lady's side in defiance of her whole blood-thirsty race, and will bear her safely to the home beyond the southern moors that he has prepared for her."—(Sidney Colvin).

**Contrasts in the poem.** "Some obvious contrasts are made in the poem : the lovers' youth and vitality are set against the old age and death associated with Angela and the Beadsman ; the warmth and security of Madeline's chamber are contrasted with the coldness and hostility of the rest of the castle and the icy storm outside ; the innocence and purity of young love are played off against the sensuousness of the revellers elsewhere in the castle ; and so on. Through these contrasts, Keats has created a tale of young love not by forgetting what everyday existence is like, but by using the mean, sordid, and commonplace as a foundation upon which to build a high romance ; the result is no mere fairy tale, but a poem that has a rounded fullness, a complexity and seriousness, a balance which remove it from the realm of mere *magnificent tour de force*."

**Jack Stillinger on *The Eve Of St. Agnes***

This critic tells us that the commonest response to *The Eve Of St. Agnes* has been an ardent appreciation of its "heady and perfumed loveliness". The poem has been called "a monody of dreamy richness", "one long sensuous utterance", "an expression of lyrical emotion", "a great affirmation of love", "a great choral hymn", an expression of "unquestioning rapture", and many things else. Remarks like these create a feeling that the poem is a mere fairy-tale romance, with little meaning in it. According to Douglas Bush, the poem is "no more than a romantic tapestry of unique richness of colour"; one is "moved less by the experience of the characters than by the incidental and innumerable beauties of descriptive phrase and rhythm".

There are certainly realistic notes in the poem, but these occur in the framework, while the main action is all romance. There is no conflict in the poem. Porphyro is never really felt to be in danger; through much of the poem the lovers are secluded from the rest of the world; and at the end, when they escape, they meet no obstacle. Though the poem ends with the nightmares of the warriors and the deaths of Angela and the Beadsman, the lovers seem untouched, for they have already fled from the castle.

Jack Stillinger goes on to point out that a small group of critics have tried to find a deeper significance in the poem. To these critics, the poem seems to dramatise certain ideas that Keats held dear to his heart before writing it, about the nature of the imagination, the relationship between this world and the next, and the progress of an individual's ascent towards spiritualisation. Madeline's waking up from her dream of Porphyro and finding her lover actually beside her, shows not only that the imagination is prophetic but that it can anticipate the pleasures which will be spiritually repeated in our next life. Madeline is, in her dream, at heaven's boundary, already enjoying a kind of spiritual repetition of earthly happiness. On being roused by Porphyro, she finds in him, "a painful change". Porphyro's reply to her words takes the form of action. He joins Madeline at heaven's boundary by melting into her dream, and together they store up pleasures to be immortally repeated in a finer tone.

Another interpretation of the poem, says Jack Stillinger, is that the castle of Madeline's father allegorically represents human life, and that Porphyro, passing upward to a closet adjoining Madeline's bed-chamber, and from there into the chamber itself, progresses from apartment to apartment in the mansion of life, executing a spiritual ascent to heaven's boundary. Porphyro's saying to the sleeping Madeline: "Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite", confirms this idea.

Jack Stillinger does not agree with this allegorical interpretation of the poem. He goes on to give his own analysis of the poem in order to show the defect in the above allegorical interpretation.

He tries to depict Porphyro as a peeping Tom and a villainous seducer. Madeline's words after the sexual consummation show a mixed attitude toward what has happened, but above all it is the lament of the seduced maiden : "No dream, alas ! alas ! and woe is mine !/Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—/Cruel ! what traitor could thee hither bring ?" Madeline implies that Porphyro has been cruel, that Angela is a traitor, and that she herself is a deceived thing : "a dove forlorn and lost". Thus, according to Jack Stillinger, Porphyro, the villainous seducer, is not making a spiritual pilgrimage.

Stillinger also points out that, no matter how much Keats entered into the feelings of his characters, he could not lose touch with the claims and responsibilities of the world he lived in. After examining a few other poems of Keats in this connection, this critic concludes : "The dreamer in Keats is ultimately one who turns his back, not merely on the pains of life, but on life altogether ; and in the poems of 1819, beginning with *The Eve Of St. Agnes*, his dreaming is condemned. If the major concern in these poems is the conflict between actuality and the ideal, the result is not a rejection of the actual, but rather a facing-up to it that amounts, in the total view, to affirmation. It is a notable part of Keats's wisdom that he never lost touch with reality, that he condemned his hood-winked dreamers (like Madeline) who would shut out the world, that he recognised life as a complexity of pleasure and pain, and laid down a rule for action : achievement of the ripest, fullest experience that one is capable of."

#### **Robin Mayhead on *The Eve Of St. Agnes***

The actual story narrated in *The Eve Of St. Agnes* is far more slender than the plot of *Isabella*. Fair Madeline retires to sleep on St. Agnes' Eve, having been told by old dames that on this night of the year young virgins might have visions of their lovers if they performed certain prescribed ceremonies. To Madeline comes young Porphyro ; she wakes ; and the lovers steal from the castle into the wind and sleet of a stormy morning. There is little more to the story than that. But nobody has attributed the merit and effectiveness of this poem primarily to its story. Much praise has been given to the building-up of the atmosphere of the poem and the richness of its visual effects. But the exact nature of the atmosphere and the function of the visual richness have not always been recognised.

*The Eve Of St. Agnes* is a poem in which Keats's taste for Spenserian decoration is lavishly exploited. It certainly contains some of his most gorgeous appeals to the visual imagination, like stanza 24 in which a high and triple-arched casement is described. But the gorgeousness is there in the poem not for its own sake ; it has a particular function in the organisation of the whole work, a function that is mainly a matter of contrast with effects that are not gorgeous at all. Thus to say that Spenserian decoration is here lavishly exploited should not be taken as meaning that this is the predominant impression left by the poem. The lavishness is there

when Keats needs it. To the attentive reader, the impression left is of a complex blend, in which the gorgeousness is one element.

Contrast and parallel are the foundation of this poem. It begins by stressing the intense cold of the night. The cold outside (stanza 1) is contrasted with the brilliantly illuminated interior where dancing and merry-making are about to commence (stanza 4). Later, in stanza 9, the cold outside is contrasted with another kind of warmth within, the warmth of young Porphyro who had come "with heart on fire for Madeline". The glowing colours of stanza 24, which in themselves suggest warmth, are in fact thrown from the stained glass of the casement by "the wintry moon". And in stanza 31, Porphyro's sumptuous feast for his lady carries associations of warmth and are explicitly contrasted with the chill.

The "carved angels" of stanza 4 are, of course, part of the elaborate decoration of the interior of the castle. But these carved angels are both linked with and contrasted with other references to angels; contrasted because they have no religious significance. In stanza 25, on the other hand, when Porphyro sees Madeline kneeling at prayer, she is compared to an angel, with all the Christian associations of the word: "she seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest....." In stanza 31, Porphyro addresses the sleeping Madeline as "My seraph fair!" In stanza 14, the "good angels" are invoked to "deceive" Madeline with dreams of her lover. The old Angela, urging Porphyro to leave (stanza 16), again refers to the "good angels". Moreover, the old woman's name is "Angela".

All these references to angels are connected with one very important element in the poem, and that is its mingling of the Christian with the secular and even with the pagan. The very superstition that sends Madeline early to bed is a piece of thoroughly pagan folk-belief, and as such most oddly associated with the Christian Saint Agnes. In stanza 5, the use of the capital "L" for "Lady" (Madeline) is a daring stroke which tends to connect her in our minds with the Saint for whose favours she will pray that night. In stanza 7, we hear of Madeline's "maiden eyes divine"; and stanza 9 tells us how Porphyro longs to gaze and worship, all unseen, perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss. We notice how the idea of worship soon gives way to physical contact. It is no accident that this is so, for Porphyro stands very much for the human and unsanctified.

In stanza 1, there is a reference to Virgin Mary. The Beadsman in that stanza represents orthodox Christianity at its most austere. If Saint Agnes' Eve is an occasion for hope in the case of Madeline, it is an occasion for "harsh penance" for the Beadsman. The contrast is not only between austerity and hoped-for ecstasy; it is also the contrast between youth and age. The flight of the lovers at the end of the poem is for them the beginning of a new life. The Beadsman, on the other hand, is linked with death from the start: "already had his death bell rung" (stanza 3). He is not the only representative of age in the poem to die as the lovers fly into the future. There is also Angela, the old, who died that very night.

The poet's comment seems to be that the only world which matters is the world into which the lovers have fled. Angela and the Beadsman belong to a dead past.

These two aged figures represent religious orthodoxy: the Beadsman at its most extreme, and Angela at its most ordinary level. Madeline's position is midway between Christianity and paganism. Although she courts St. Agnes and her saintly care, and prays with all the appearance of devout Christianity, her very belief in the superstition is non-Christian. And it is to be noted that Madeline, as also Porphyro's love for her, is associated with the rose which has for centuries been a symbol of beauty both heavenly and earthly, both spiritual and physical:

Rose-bloom fell on her hands.....(Stanza 25)

.....  
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

(Stanza 27)

.....  
Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose...(Stanza 16)

.....  
Into her dream he melted, as the rose,  
Blendeth its odour with the violet,— (Stanza 36).

For all Madeline's devotion, it is the earthly, physical aspect of the rose that will win the day. When she flies with Porphyro from the castle, we feel that she is leaving the spiritual aspect behind with the dead bodies of Angela and the Beadsman.

The special function of Porphyro may now be considered. It is Porphyro, hated by Madeline's family, who carries her off into a new life. Apparently his role sounds very much like that of the conventional romantic lover rescuing his lady fair from her wicked relatives. Yet this view of him is not supported by an attentive reading of the poem. In the first place, there is no reason to believe that Madeline suffers persecution at the hands of her relatives. Secondly, her elopement with Porphyro does not distinctly mean that she is going to a more comfortable life. Although Porphyro brings his lady the love that she craves, he takes her with him to a world whose reality may prove to be bitter, or disillusioning, or a mixture of pleasure and pain. Their new life, whatever it may bring them, begins with no glamorous sunrise. When Madeline wakes, a storm has already begun. In eloping with her lover, Madeline must leave behind all those things which have been described by the poet in a glowing manner, including the dainties that Porphyro has arranged on the table. There is nothing glamorous about the sleet and the iced gusts of wind into which the lovers must fly. As they steal to the castle door, the tapestries and carpets are agitated by the wind. It is as though Keats were saying that the decorative fancy, to which he has himself given such rein in this very poem, is at the mercy of reality much stronger than tapestries and carpets.

Thus the "gorgeousness" of *The Eve Of St. Agnes* must be seen in its proper setting. Magnificent though it may be, it is something from which the lovers have to flee, just as the poet himself, though not turning his back upon it, has put it to superbly functional use in a poem whose overall effect is far from merely decorative.

This poem is not to be regarded as an attack on Christianity or as a dismissal of paganism. Both Christianity in its pure form, and Christianity in its adulterated, "paganised" form, are part of the world on which the lovers turn their backs. Yet it would be a mistake to suppose that Keats is merely dismissing the belief that he does not share. For although Angela and the Beadsman may die, and Madeline may be roused to a new world of reality, the storm into which the lovers fly is full of dangerous possibilities. It is not a flight into a glamorous land, but a step into the coldly real world. Keats does not offer the lovers' flight as a triumphant escape from a world of superstition, both institutional and pagan, into an illuminated landscape in which everything is for the best. What Keats is doing is to explore in a more subtle manner the tension between the spiritual and the physical, and the ambiguous nature of love.

#### Roger Sharrock on *The Eve of St. Agnes*

In the flow and throb of its emotion, the narrative of this poem is wrought up to the pitch of lyric intensity, though the method is richly descriptive. Everything in the poem contributes to the isolation of the central figures, splendid in their romantic passion against the dark background of the hatred of their elders, cold hearts in a cold season. Though the poem is loaded with descriptive detail, none of the pictorial passages is merely decorative. Everything contributes to the perpetual tension between youth and age, life and death, warmth and cold, that make up the musical harmony of the poem. Keats was clearly inspired by the similar musical pattern in *Romeo and Juliet*. Angela, the old, recalls the Nurse in Shakespeare's play; her age and weakness is several times emphasised, until in the conclusion she dies "palsy-twitted", and like Shakespeare's Nurse she has a coarse mind which is ready to attribute the worst motives to Porphyro's desire to be taken into Madeline's room. The treatment of the Nurse in both works throws into relief the pure ardour of the young lovers. The Beadsman, too, meagre, barefoot, wan, leads his life even further away from the sources of love and passion, among the sculptured dead. His appearance at the beginning of the poem provides for a "double contrast: first," the silver snarling trumpets suddenly break upon this universe of death and penance; they usher in a lively but unfeeling and superficial world which has colour but no inner life, and some members of which are also old or deformed ("dwarfish Hildebrand", "that old Lord Maurice").

Then comes the genuine passion of Porphyro and Madeline. They and what belongs to them are described in rich natural colour terms, usually those of crimson and the rose: "Suddenly a thought came like a full-blown rose." The stained glass of Madeline's cas-

ment is coloured like the wings of the tiger-moth, and its emblazonings blush with the blood of queens and kings.

The poem deals with a fully consummated passion. The lovers lie at the warm heart of the castle, secluded from the physical and moral coldness outside. We move from the utter chill of the natural world, the hare in the frozen grass, to the Beadsman in the chapel, too old and austere for love, then to the revelry in the hall, and finally to the centre of this world of love, Madeline's room, her bed, and Madeline in it. There is then a movement outwards from the warm centre, when the lovers escape into the night.

## THE EVE OF ST. AGNES

## I

St. Anges' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was !  
 The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold ;  
 •The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,  
 And silent was the flock in woolly fold :  
 Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told  
 His rosary, and while his frosted breath,  
 Like pious incense from a censer old,  
 Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,  
 Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

## II

His prayer he saith, this patient, holy man ;  
 Then takes his lamp, and riseth from his knees,  
 And back returneth, meagre, barefoot, wan,  
 Along the chapel aisle by slow degrees :  
 The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze,  
 Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails :  
 Knights, ladies, praying in dumb orat'ries,  
 He passeth by ; and his weak spirit fails  
 To think how they may ache in icy hoods and mails.

10

## III

Northward he turneth through a little door,  
 And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue •  
 Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor  
 But no—already had his deathbell rung :  
 The joys of all his life were said and sung :  
 His was harsh penance on St. Agnes' Eve :  
 Another way he went, and soon among  
 Rough ashes sat he for his soul's reprieve,  
 And all night kept awake, for sinner's sake to grieve.

20

## IV

That ancient Beadsman heard the prelude soft ;  
 And so it chanc'd, for many a door was wide,  
 From hurry to and fro. Soon, up aloft,  
 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide :  
 The level chambers, ready with their pride,  
 Were glowing to receive a thousand guests :  
 The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,  
 Star'd, where upon their heads the cornice rests,  
 With hair blown back, and wings put cross-wise on their breasts.

30

## V

At length burst in the argent revelry,  
 With plume, tiara, and all rich array,  
 Numerous as shadows haunting faerily  
 The brain, new stuff'd, in youth, with triumphs gay  
 Of old romance. These let us wish away,  
 And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there,  
 Whose heart had brooded, all that wintry day,  
 On love, and wing'd St. Agnes' saintly care,  
 As she had heard old dames full many times declare.

40

## VI

They told her how, upon 'St. Agnes' Eve,  
 Young virgins might have visions of delight,  
 And soft adorings from their loves receive  
 Upon the honey'd middle of the night,  
 If ceremonies due they did aright ;  
 As, supperless to bed they must retire,  
 And couch supine their beauties, lily white ;  
 Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require  
 Of Heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire.

50

## VII

Full of this whim was thoughtful Madeline :  
 The music, yearning like a God in pain,  
 She scarcely heard : her maiden eyes divine,  
 Fix'd on the floor, saw many a sweeping train  
 Pass by—she heeded not at all : in vain  
 Came many a tiptoe, amorous cavalier,  
 And back retir'd ; not cool'd by high disdain,  
 But she saw not : her heart was otherwhere :  
 She sigh'd for Agnes' dreams, the sweetest of the year.

60

## VIII

She dane'd along with vague, regardless eyes,  
 Anxious her lips, her breathing quick and short :  
 The hallow'd hour was near at hand : she sighs  
 Amid the timbrels, and the throng'd resort  
 Of whisperers in anger, or in sport ;

'Mid looks of love, defiance, hate, and scorn,  
Hoodwink'd with faery fancy ; all amort,  
Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,  
And all the bliss to be before to-morrow morn.

70

## IX

So, purposing each moment to retire,  
She linger'd still. Meantime, across the moors,  
Had come young Porphyro, with heart on fire  
For Madeline. Beside the portal doors,  
Buttress'd from moonlight, stands he, and implores  
All saints to give him sight of Madeline,  
But for one moment in the tedious hours,  
That he might gaze and worship all unseen ;  
Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss—in sooth such things have been. 80

## X

He ventures in : let no buzz'd whisper tell :  
All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords  
Will storm his heart, Love's fev'rous citadel :  
For him, those chambers held barbarian hordes,  
Hyena foemen, and hot-blooded lords,  
Whose very dogs would execrations howl  
Against his lineage : not one breast affords  
Him any mercy, in that mansion foul,  
Save one old beldame, weak in body and in soul. 90

## XI

Ah, happy chance ! the aged creature caine,  
Shuffling along with ivory-headed wand,  
To where he stood, hid from the torch's flame,  
Behind a broad hall-pillar, far beyond  
The sound of merriment and chorus bland :  
He startled her ; but soon she knew his face,  
And grasp'd his fingers in her palsied hand,  
Saying, 'Mercy, Porphyro ! hie thee from this place :  
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race !

## XII

'Get hence ! get hence ! there's dwarfish Hildebrand ;  
'He had a fever late, and in the fit  
'He cursed thee and thine, both house and land :  
'Then there's that old Lord Maurice, not a whit  
'More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me ! flit !  
'Flit like a ghost away.'—'Ah, Gossip dear,  
'We're safe enough ; here in this arm-chair sit,  
'And tell me how'—'Good Saints ! not here, not hei  
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier.'

101

## XIII

He follow'd through a lowly arched way,  
 Brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume,  
 And as she mutter'd 'Well-a—well-a-day !'  
 He found him in a little moonlight room,  
 Pale, lattic'd, chill, and silent as a tomb.  
 'Now tell me where is Madeline,' said he.  
 'O tell me, Angela, by the holy loom,  
 'Which none but secret sisterhood may see,  
 'When they St. Agnes' wool are weaving piously.'

110

## XIV

'St. Agnes ! Ah ! it is St. Agnes' Eve—  
 'Yet men will murder upon holy days :  
 'Thou must hold water in a witch's sieve,  
 'And be liege-lord of all the Elves and Fays,  
 'To venture so : it fills me with amaze  
 'To see thee, Porphyro !—St. Agnes' Eve !  
 'God's help ! my lady fair the conjuror plays  
 'This very night ; good angels her deceive !  
 But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve

120

## XV

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,  
 While Porphyro upon her face doth look,  
 Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone  
 Who keepeth clos'd a wondrous riddle-book,  
 As spectacled she sits in chimney nook.  
 But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told  
 His lady's purpose ; and he scarce could brook  
 Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,  
 And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

130

## XVI

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,  
 Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart  
 Made purple riot : then doth he propose  
 A stratagem, that makes the beldame start :  
 'A cruel man and impious thou art :  
 'Sweet lady, let her pray, and sleep, and dream  
 'Alone with her good angels, far apart  
 'From wicked men like thee. Go, go !—I deem  
 'Thou canst not surely be the same that thou didst seem.'

140

## XVII

'I will not harm her, by all saints I swear,'  
 Quoth Porphyro : 'O may I ne'er find grace  
 'When my weak voice shall whisper its last prayer,  
 'If one of her soft ringlets I displace,

'Or look with ruffian passion in her face :  
 'Good Angela, believe me by these tears ;  
 'Or I will, even in a moment's space,  
 'Awake, with horrid shout, my foemen's ears,  
 'And beard them, though they be more fang'd than wolves and  
 bears.'

150

## XVIII

'Ah ! why wilt thou affright a feeble soul ?  
 'A poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing,  
 'Whose passing-bell may ere the midnight toll ;  
 'Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening,  
 'Were never miss'd'—Thus plaining, doth she bring  
 A gentler speech from burning Porphyro :  
 So woeful, and of such deep sorrowing,  
 That Angela gives promise she will do  
 Whatever he shall wish, betide her weal or woe.

160

## XIX

Which was, to lead him, in close secrecy,  
 • Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide  
 Him in a closet, of such privacy  
 That he might see her beauty unespied,  
 And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,  
 While legion'd faeries pac'd the coverlet,  
 And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed.  
 Never on such a night have lovers met,  
 Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt.

170

## XX

'It shall be as thou wishest,' said the Dame :  
 'All eates and dainties shall be stored there  
 'Quickly on this feast-night : by the tambour frame  
 'Her own lute thou wilt see : no time to spare,  
 'For I am slow and feeble, and scarce dare  
 'On such a catering trust my dizzy head.  
 'Wait here, my child, with patience ; kneel in prayer  
 'The while : Ah ! thou must needs the lady wed,  
 'Or may I never leave my grave among the dead.'

180

## XXI

So saying, she hobbled off with busy fear.  
 The lover's endless minutes slowly pass'd ;  
 The dame return'd, and whisper'd in his ear  
 To follow her ; with aged eyes aghast  
 From fright of dim espial. Safe at last,  
 Through many a dusky gallery, they gain  
 The maiden's chamber, silken, hush'd, and chaste ;  
 Where Porphyro took covert, pleas'd amain.  
 His poor guide hurried back with agues in her brain.

## XXII

Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,  
 Old Angela was feeling for the stair,  
 When Madeline, St. Agne's charmed maid,  
 Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware :  
 With silver taper's light, and pious care,  
 She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led  
 To a safe level matting. Now prepare,  
 Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed ;  
 She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled.

190

## XXIII

Out went the taper as she hurried in ;  
 Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died :  
 She clos'd the door, she panted, all akin  
 To spirits of the air, and visions wide :  
 No uttered syllable, or, woe betide !  
 But to her heart, her heart was voluble,  
 Paining with eloquence her balmy side ;  
 As though a tongueless nightingale should swell  
 Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell.

200

## XXIV

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,  
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
 Of fruits, and flowers and bunches of knot-grass,  
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings ;  
 And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,  
 A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.

## XXV

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,  
 And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast.  
 As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon ;  
 Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,  
 And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
 And on her hair a glory, like a saint :  
 She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,  
 Save wings, for heaven :—Porphyro grew faint :  
 She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

220

## XXVI

Anon its heart revives : her vespers done,  
 Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees ;  
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one ;  
 Loosens her fragrant bodice ; by degrees  
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees :

230

Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,  
 Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,  
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,  
 But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.

## XXVII

Soon, trembling in her soft and chilly nest,  
 In sort of wakeful swoon, perplex'd she lay,  
 Until the poppied warmth of sleep oppress'd  
 Her soothed limbs, and soul fatigued away ;  
 Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day ;  
 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain ;  
 Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray  
 Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,  
 As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

240.

## XXVIII

Stol'n to this paradise, and so entranced,  
 Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress,  
 And listen'd to her breathing, if it chanced  
 To wake into a slumberous tenderness ;  
 Which when he heard, that minute did he bless,  
 And breath'd himself : then from the closet crept,  
 Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness.  
 And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept,  
 And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where lo !—how fast she slept.

250.

## XXIX

Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon  
 Made a dim, silver twilight, soft he set  
 A table, and, half anguish'd, threw thereon  
 A cloth of woven crimson, gold, and jet :—  
 O for some drowsy Morphean amulet !  
 The boisterous, midnight, festive clarion,  
 The kettle-drum, and far-heard clarionet,  
 Affray his ears, though but in dying tone :—  
 The hall door shuts again, and all the noise is gone.

---

## XXX

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,  
 In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,  
 While he from forth the closet brought a heap  
 Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd ;  
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon ;  
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
 From Fez ; and spiced dainties, every one,  
 From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

## XXXI

These delicates he heap'd with glowing hand  
 On golden dishes and in baskets bright  
 Of wreathed silver : sumptuous they stand  
 In the retired quiet of the night,  
 Filling the chilly room with perfume light.—  
 ‘And now, my love, my seraph fair, awake !  
 ‘Thou art my heaven, and I thine eremite :  
 ‘Open thine eyes, for meek St. Agnes’ sake,  
 ‘Or I shall drowse beside thee, so my soul doth ache.’

## XXXII

Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved arm  
 Sank in her pillow. Shaded was her dream  
 By the dusk curtains :—’twas a midnight charm  
 Impossible to melt as iced stream :  
 The lustrous salvers in the moonlight gleam ;  
 Broad golden fringe upon the carpet lies :  
 It seem’d he never, never could redeem  
 From such a steadfast spell his lady’s eyes ;  
 So mus’d awhile, entoil’d in woofed phantasies.

280

## XXXIII

Awakening up, he took her hollow lute,—  
 Tumultuous,—and, in chords that tenderest be,  
 He play’d an ancient ditty, long since mute,  
 In Provence call’d, ‘La belle dame sans mercy :’  
 Close to her ear touching the melody :—  
 Wherewith disturb’d, she utter’d a soft moan :  
 He ceased—she panted quick—and suddenly  
 Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone :  
 Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone.

290

## XXXIV

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,  
 Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep :  
 There was a painful change, that nigh expell’d  
 The blisses of her dream so pure and deep  
 At which fair Madeline began to weep,  
 And moan forth witless words with many a sigh ;  
 While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep ;  
 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,  
 Fearing to move or speak, she look’d so dreamingly.

300

## XXXV

‘Ah, Porphyro !’ said she, ‘but even now  
 ‘Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,  
 ‘Made tuneable with every sweetest vow ;  
 ‘And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear :

310

'How chang'd thou art ! how pallid, chill, and drear !  
 'Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,  
 'Those looks immortal, those complainings dear !  
 'Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,  
 'For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go.'

## XXXVI

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose ;  
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
 Solution sweet : meantime the frost-wind blows  
 Like Love's alarm patterning the sharp sleet  
 Against the window-panes ; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

320

## XXXVII

'Tis dark : quick pattereth the flaw-blown sleet :  
 'This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline !'  
 'Tis dark : the iced gusts still rave and beat :  
 'No dream, alas ! alas ! and woe is mine !  
 'Porphyro will leave me here to fade and pine.—  
 'Cruel ! what traitor could thee hither bring ?  
 'I curse not, for my heart is lost in thine,  
 'Though thou forsakest a deceived thing ;—  
 'A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wing.'

330

## XXXVIII

'My Madeline ! sweet dreamer ! lovely bride !  
 'Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest ?  
 'Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed ?  
 'Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest  
 'After so many hours of toil and quest,  
 'A famish'd pilgrim,—saved by miracle.  
 'Though I have found, I will not rob thy nest  
 'Saving of thy sweet self ; if thou think'st well  
 'To trust, fair Madeline, to no rude infidel.

340

## XXXIX

'Hark ! 'tis an elfin-storm from faery land,  
 'Of haggard seeming, but a boon indeed :  
 'Arise—arise ! the morning is at hand ;—  
 'The bloated wassaillers will never heed :—  
 'Let us away, my love, with happy speed ;  
 'There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see,—  
 'Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead :  
 'Awake ! arise ! my love, and fearless be,  
 'For o'er the southern moors I have a home for thee.'

350

## XL

She hurried at his words, beset with fears,  
 For there were sleeping dragons all around,  
 At glaring watch, perhaps, with ready spears—  
 Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found—  
 In all the house was heard no human sound.  
 A chain-droop'd lamp was flickering by each door ;  
 The arras, rich with horseman, hawk, and hound,  
 Flutter'd in the besieging wind's uproar ;  
 And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

360

## XLI

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall ;  
 Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide ;  
 Where lay the Porter, in uneasy sprawl,  
 With a huge empty flaggon by his side :  
 The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,  
 But his sagacious eye an inmate owns :  
 By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide :—  
 The chains lie silent on the footworn stones ;—  
 The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

## XLII

And they are gone : ay, ages long ago  
 These lovers fled away into the storm.  
 That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
 And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
 Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
 Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
 Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform ;  
 The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

370

## 4. Explanations

**The title :** St. Agnes was a Roman maiden who won a name for her purity, beauty and innocence. On account of her Christian religion, she was persecuted and, in the end, put to death. Having died as a martyr to her religion, she was canonized on the 21st January, 304 A.D.; that is, her name was enrolled in the list of saints. The 21st of January is, therefore, observed as St. Agnes' day, while the evening of the 20th January is known as the eve of St. Agnes.

Tradition has made St. Agnes the patron saint of virgins, that is, the protectress of virgin girls. According to a popular belief, a virgin, by performing certain ceremonies on the eve of St. Agnes, could see her would-be husband in a dream. This belief forms the basis of the story of this poem.

In this poem, Keats has given us a picture of the medieval world and has at the same time told a tale of bold and lucky love.

Some descriptive passages in the poem may lie outside the action, yet they have a great interest for the reader. Such passages afterwards became a source of inspiration to the Pre-Raphaelite poets.

#### *Stanza 1*

**Explanation.** *and while his frosted breath...his prayer he saith*—The Beadsman's frozen breath rose upwards just as the smoke of a fragrant substance burnt in a censer for holy purposes rises upwards. Indeed, his frozen breath seemed to be flying towards heaven in a continuous cloud of vapours, rising above the picture of Virgin Mary. (The rising breath of the Beadsman is here compared to the whiff of fragrant smoke rising from a censer. A censer is a small vessel in which incense is burnt. "Incense" is a fragrant substance burnt by pious people at the time of prayer.)

#### *Stanza 2*

**Explanation.** *The sculptur'd dead...icy hoods and mails*—The Beadsman passed the many statues of knights and ladies which were represented in an attitude of dumb prayer. Each statue was enclosed by black iron railings and it seemed as if each dead man was held a prisoner within those railings as inside the Purgatory. (Purgatory is the region where the souls of the dead have to do penance before they can enter heaven). Each enclosure wherin stood a statue seemed to be a Purgatory holding a soul as a prisoner. As the Beadsman passed these statues of ladies wearing hoods, and knights wearing armour, he had a feeling that they were bitterly feeling the cold. Indeed, his weak heart almost sank at the thought of the cold those statues might be feeling.

(*Dumb orat'ries*—The word "oratory" is here used in the sense of prayer. "Dumb oratories", because the statues cannot actually utter their prayers ; the statues are merely represented in an attitude of prayer.)

#### *Stanza 3*

**Explanation.** *His was harsh penance ..for sinner's sake to grieve*—The Beadsman was to undergo severe penance on this night, the eve of St. Agnes. Instead of listening to the sweet music or going in the direction from which music came, he turned his steps to another side, and a little latter he sat down to do his penance among the rough ashes. He kept a night-long vigil, praying not only for the pardon of his own sins but also of the sins of others. All night he did penance to obtain God's mercy for himself and for others.

(There was a custom in the Middle Ages of a holy man praying for sinners in return for alms or a pension.)

#### *Stanza 4*

**Explanation.** *The carved angels...cross-wise on their breasts*—In these lines Keats refers to the sculptural decorations on the walls

of the great hall. The figures of angels were carved under the cornice.\* The expression in the eyes of the angels was keen and inquisitive and they looked downwards with a fixed gaze. Their hair was brushed backward and their wings were folded on their breasts in the shape of a cross (because the cross is a holy sign). The figures of angels carved under the cornice lent a solemn grandeur to the hall.

What is noteworthy in these lines is Keats's power of lending life and movement even to the lifeless sculptural decorations. The carved figures of angels are here represented as staring with eager glances as if it were possible for them to see things. Similarly Keats has given life, in the second stanza, to the statues of the dead whom he represents as feeling the bitter cold : "The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seem to freeze."

### *Stanza 5*

**Explanation.** *At length burst in.....of old romance*—At length the multitude of guests walked into the hall in a splendid procession. The knights looked handsome with feathers worn in their head-dresses, while the ladies looked lovely with their jewelled crowns. The richly-dressed men and women in the hall presented a fascinating spectacle. In fact, they looked like the knights and ladies of old romantic stories which are so eagerly read by young men whose minds are therefore full of the heroic adventures and victories of chivalrous knights. (The whole crowd of merry-makers was like a procession of airy images of knights and ladies which haunt the mind of a young man who has read many romantic stories of chivalry.)

(*Argent*—silver bright ; gleaming ; resplendent. *Revelry*—the revellers or merry-makers. *Plume*—feathers worn by men in their head-dresses. *Tiara*—a small jewelled crown worn as a head-dress by a lady.)

### *Stanza 7*

**Explanation.** *Came many a tiptoe.....the sweetest of the year*—Many gallant and handsome young men approached Madeline in a state of excitement and expectation. They were in a mood of love-making and they sought Madeline's company. But they had to withdraw from her presence, feeling disappointed. It was not because Madeline wilfully offended them or treated them scornfully, but because she was so absorbed in her own thoughts and dreams that she failed to take any notice of the young men who approached her. She was longing for the sweet dreams which are seen only on the eve of St. Agnes. These dreams are the sweetest of the year because in them virgins see their lovers and would-be husbands.

### *Stanza 8*

**Explanation.** *She sighs.....before tomorrow morn*—Madeline

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\**Cornice*—the ornamental moulding round the walls of a room just below the ceiling.

sighed with longing and desire, while the drums were being beaten and the music was being played. She was surrounded by the multitude of guests who were talking in whispers, some of them using angry words, others joking and laughing. As it was a large gathering, the guests were in different moods. Some had an expression of love in their eyes ; others had hatred in their eyes ; still others looked challengingly, hatefully or scornfully upon one another. There were different passions in the hearts of the guests—love, hatred, hostility, contempt—and these were all reflected in their eyes.

Madeline, however, was absolutely unconscious of the feelings and passions of the guests. She was absorbed in her own thoughts of romantic love ; her imagination had bewitched her with the sweet vision that she was to see. In fact, she was perfectly indifferent to everything except St. Agnes, the unshorn lambs dedicated to St. Agnes, and the sweet dreams that a virgin could see on the eve of St. Agnes. Her whole attention was concentrated on St. Agnes and everything connected with St. Agnes.

(*Hood-wink'd with faery fancy*—deceived by the magic power of the imagination. *All amort*—completely dead ; that is, absolutely indifferent to ; utterly unmindful of.

*Her lambs unshorn*—an unshorn lamb is one whose fleece has not been removed. It was a practice to dedicate unshorn lambs to St. Agnes. These lambs were shorn on the eve of St. Agnes and their wool was spun throughout the night by nuns who kept awake for this purpose. This wool, regarded as sacred, was then offered at the shrine of St. Agnes.)

### Stanza 13

**Note :** An idea of the vastness of the castle is here conveyed to us. It was such a large castle that certain parts of it had remained unused for a long time so that cobwebs had appeared there. Then its largeness is also conveyed to us through the phrase "silent as a tomb", because this particular room was so far removed from the main hall that the sounds of music or merry-making were not audible there.

**Explanation :** *O tell me, Angela.....weaving piously*—Here is another reference to the practice of spinning the wool of lambs dedicated to St. Agnes. The wool was spun and then woven into a fabric by the pious nuns in a convent. The loom on which the wool was woven was regarded as holy. Porphyro here charges Angela by that holy loom to tell him the truth regarding the whereabouts of Madeline. He uses this form of oath so that Angela may not put him off.

(*Secret sisterhood*—the nuns in a convent.)

### Stanza 14

**Explanation :** *Thou must hold water.....to venture so*—Angela says that she is really astonished at Porphyro's daring in having

entered the castle of his enemies. She cannot understand how he will protect himself if detected and attacked by Hildebrand and others. The fact that he has dared to come here shows that he must be in possession of some magic power to defend himself. He must be a magician having the power to hold water in a witch's sieve. Or, he must be the monarch of all the fairies. Only then can he feel safe.

(Witches were supposed to have sieves that could hold water.) Angela means that only by some magic or miracle can Porphyro save himself from his foes.

*My lady fair the conjuror plays*—Angela informs Porphyro that Madeline believes in the superstition connected with the eve of St. Agnes and that she hopes to see her lover in a dream during the night. (*Conjuror*—magician. *Mickle*—much).

#### Stanza 17

**Explanation:** *Sudden a thought.....purple riot*—Suddenly a delightful idea occurred to Porphyro. It was a fully developed idea, fascinating and exciting, and it could be compared to a rose which is fully open and which is fascinating and exciting. This idea brought colour to Porphyro's face and made him blush deeply. His heart ached with the excitement of this idea and it caused a violent but romantic agitation in his heart.

(The phrases "full-blown rose" and "purple riot" are noteworthy.)

#### Stanza 19

**Explanation:** *While legion'd faeries.....all the monstrous debt*—Porphyro would gaze upon Madeline's bodily charms while she slept in her bed and hundreds of fairies moved to and fro over her. A multitude of fairies would attend upon the sleeping Madeline. She would look pale with anxiety, awaiting the result of the ceremonies which she had performed.

The approaching interview of Porphyro with Madeline is here compared to the meeting of Merlin and Vivien on a stormy night. Never since the fateful meeting of Merlin and Vivien had two lovers met each other on such a night. In other words, the meeting of Porphyro and Madeline would be the first meeting since the meeting of Merlin and Vivien on such a stormy night.

(It is to be noted that a storm has now begun to blow. At the opening of the poem, the moon was shining.)

**Merlin:** Merlin was a magician who figures in Arthurian romances (stories relating to King Arthur, a legendary king of the Middle Ages). He used to help King Arthur to defeat his enemies by his counsel and his magic. Vivien, a girl whose father had been killed fighting against King Arthur, undertook to avenge her father's death. So she decided to entrap King Arthur's counsellor and magician, Merlin. Merlin felt attracted by her charms and fell into

her trap. On a stormy night, she took him into a wood and there extracted from him a magic charm which she used against him to shut him for ever in an old oak tree. (Tennyson has written a poem on the subject : *Merlin and Vivien*).

*Since Merlin paid his Demon all the monstrous debt*--Merlin obtained his magical powers from the Demon or the Devil. Thus Merlin owed a debt to the Devil or Satan. This debt was paid when Merlin was imprisoned for ever in an old oak tree by his cunning mistress, Vivien, using a magic charm she had extracted from him. Keats seems to imply a bargain like that between Faust and the Devil, under which Merlin pledged his soul to the Devil in return for the magical powers bestowed upon him.

Faust (a great scholar and philosopher) entered into a pact with the Devil. According to the pact, the Devil was to satisfy all the desires of Faust for a certain number of years after which the Devil was to take possession of Faust's soul and take it to hell to suffer eternal damnation. Here we are to imagine that Merlin entered into some sort of pact with the Devil and obtained certain magic powers from him. After successfully using these magic powers for a certain period, Merlin himself sell a victim to a magic charm which he used to employ against others. In this way, he paid his debt to the Devil just as Faust had paid his debt to the Devil by surrendering his soul.

*Monstrous debt*--a dreadful or horrible debt ; the borrowing of magic powers used for evil purposes ; an unholy debt.

**Explanation :** *Never on such a night.....the monstrous debt* (Lines 170-171)--The approaching interview of Porphyro with Madeline is here compared to the meeting of Merlin and Vivien on a stormy night. Never since the fateful meeting of Merlin and Vivien had two lovers met on such a night. In other words, the meeting of Porphyro and Madeline would be the first meeting since the meeting of Merlin and Vivien on a night fraught with danger.

#### Stanza 20

**Note :** Angela agrees to do everything according to Porphyro's wishes. She says that she would go and put delicious foods in Madeline's bed-chamber so that the two lovers might share the feast when they met each other during the night. She adds that she would like him to get Madeline as his bride, failing which she is prepared to suffer the punishment of eternal death. According to a religious belief, all the dead will rise from their graves on the Doomsday and appear for judgment before God. Angela, in order to emphasise her statement, says that her soul would never rise from the grave on the Judgment Day if she does not succeed in uniting the two lovers.

*Cates and dainties*--delicious foods.

*Stanza 21*

*Hobbled off*—walked away lamely. *With busy fear*—feeling both occupied and afraid. She was busy because she had to make certain arrangements, and she was afraid lest her actions should be detected by Madeline's kinsmen.

*From fright of dim aspial*—Angela was terribly afraid lest she should, on account of her feeble eyesight, miss seeing somebody who might be watching her and Porphyro. (Or, she was fear-stricken because of the possibility of being detected in the darkness.)

*Silken, hush'd, and chaste*—Three exquisite and most appropriate epithets are here used to describe Madeline's bed-chamber. *With agues in her brain*—Angela's brain was in a state of fever on account of fear.

*Stanza 22*

**Note :** As Angela was going down the stairs, she met Madeline coming up. Madeline turned and affectionately led her aged nurse down to the foot of the staircase. Then she climbed up again.

**Explanation :** *She comes, she comes again, like ring-dove fray'd and fled*—Madeline could at that time be compared to a wood-pigeon which is frightened by some danger and, in a state of panic, flies to its nest to take shelter there. Madeline was afraid and nervous lest she should miss those dreams for which she had been waiting.

*Stanza 23*

**Explanation :** *But to her heart.....in her dell*—Madeline did not utter any sound, but her heart was full of tumult. There were many mingled feelings and emotions in it struggling for expression but not finding expression because of the condition imposed upon her to remain silent. This enforced silence and the inability to express her feelings caused a pain in her heart. Her left side began almost to ache because of the agitation in her heart. (The heart is on the left side. The word "balmy" is used to suggest Madeline's physical loveliness.) She could be compared to a tongueless nightingale who is unable to pour forth her feelings in her songs and who is choked to death by the intensity of her emotion. In other words, Madeline's heart was almost about to burst with the intensity of her feelings which could not get an outlet through words since she was forbidden to speak.

**Note :** This stanza and the next two are famous for their choice diction and phraseology and show Keats as one of the greatest masters of expression.

*Stanza 24*

This stanza describes the rich decorations of Madeline's chamber-window.

**Explanation :** *And diamonded with.....deep-damask'd wings*—The window was fitted with panes looking like diamonds and decorated with curious, artistic designs or patterns. The panes were painted in numerous bright and gorgeous colours. The variety with

which the panes were painted would remind the beholder of a tiger-moth which has richly streaked wings of variegated colours.

**Explanation :** *And in the midst.....queens and kings*—On the window-panes were carved innumerable armorial bearings and heraldic signs which were a witness to the long history of Madeline's family and her noble descent. Besides the heraldic signs, there were the figures of many saints dimly or faintly carved on the window. In the midst of all these carvings and paintings, there was depicted a shield with a device on it. This shield was depicted in red and, as one looked at it, it seemed to be blushing and reminding the beholder of the innumerable deeds of valour and heroism that the brave and noble ancestors of Madeline had performed. (This shield was also an indication of Madeline's noble descent.)

The word "blush'd" here makes the colour seem to come and go, while the mind is at the same time sent travelling from the maiden's chamber to thoughts of her lineage and ancestral fame.—(Sidney Colvin).

**Note :** The description of the casement creates in our minds an elaborate picture of medieval chivalry and an atmosphere of medieval romance and adventure. This stanza has greatly been admired by critics for its pictorial quality and its colourful splendour. It is an unequalled description of the artistic beauty of a Gothic window.

#### Stanza 25

**Note :** The moonlight refracted through the red window-panes fell upon Madeline's fair breast as she knelt to pray. She looked beautiful and pure like an angel. Porphyro's passion was inflamed on seeing her beauty and innocence.

The sensuous appeal of this, like that of the preceding, stanza is noteworthy.

*Gules*—this word, in the heraldic language, means red. *Warm gules*—rich and varied colours among which the red colour is most prominent.

*And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast*—The well-known painter Millias objected to this line because he said that this refraction of moonlight was not possible. But a critic has replied that we are in a fairyland, that this is a fairy moon, and that if the refraction of moonlight was not possible, it ought to be. In other words, even if Keats's picture in this line is scientifically inaccurate, it does not matter. It is enough that the line is poetically beautiful.

#### Stanza 26

**Note :** This is another highly sensuous stanza. It is full of suggestion and is, perhaps, the most enjoyable stanza for youthful readers. It is a voluptuous stanza. The phrases "warmed jewels", "fragrant bodice", "rich attire" etc. lend a great appeal to this stanza.

*Stanza 27*

**Note :** Madeline then got into her bed, shivering with cold. After a while, she fell asleep. She was now like a rose that has shut and reverted to its original condition of a bud.

*Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray*—As Madeline lay in the hold of sleep, she might be compared to a Christian prayer-book that is tightly held in the hands of a Christian who wants to protect it from pagans. (This is not a very apt or happy simile.)

(*Missal*—a Christian prayer-book. *Swart*—dark complexioned. *Paynims*—pagans.)

*As though a rose.....bud again*—Here is a striking and fanciful simile. Having fallen asleep, Madeline is compared to a rose whose petals have closed and which has again become a bud.

*Stanzas 29—31*

**Explanation :** *O for some drowsy Morphean amulet.....* Porphyro earnestly wished that he were in possession of some magic charm that could keep Madeline fast asleep till he had made the necessary arrangements.

*An azure-lidded sleep*—Here is another example of Keats's gift of phrase-making. "Azure" means blue. The idea is that, as she slept, the blueness of Madeline's eyes could be discerned or seen through her transparent eyelids.

Stanza 30 possesses a rich sensuous quality. The description of the various dainties brought from distant lands appeals greatly to our senses of smell and taste. The whole of the stanza is a rich feast for the reader. There is an unsurpassed collection of dainties here, appetising and delicious, with the rich associations of distant lands.

*Seraph*—angel. *Eremite*—hermit; worshipper.

*Or I shall drowse beside thee*—The intensity of his passion makes Porphyro almost faint. The lovers in Keats's poems are generally of the swooning type, so intense is their passion. There is almost an element of morbidity in the passion of these lovers.

*Stanzas 32—35*

As Porphyro whispered words of love, his warm trembling hand sank into her soft pillow. Madeline was seeing the dreams sent to her by St. Agnes. She slept so fast that it seemed she would never wake up. Porphyro picked up her lute and softly played a tune known as "The beautiful lady without pity". The music awakened the sleeping Madeline who opened her eyes, somewhat frightened. Porphyro fell on his knees beside her. Madeline said that only a little while before she had been seeing Porphyro in her dream and listening to his oaths of love. She entreated him not to leave her alone.

*Stanza 36*

*Voluptuous*—passionate. *Ethereal*—unearthly. *Flush'd*—glowing with passion. *The sapphire heaven*—the blue sky.

**Explanation :** *Beyond a mortal man.....solution sweet*—The amorous words of Madeline stirred in the heart of Porphyro an intense desire, a burning passion. As he stood up, he looked an unearthly creature, so changed was he by his passion. The warm glow of his passion could be seen on his face. He could be compared to a star twinkling in the peaceful blue sky. In this mood of burning passion, he joined Madeline in bed. The two lovers became one; they merged with each other just as the sweet smell of a rose may mingle with the fragrance of a violet. Their union was, indeed, sweet and pleasurable to them.

(These are richly suggestive lines describing the sexual embrace of the lovers.)

If we wish to be prudish, we may not interpret these lines as describing the sexual embrace of the lovers. We may interpret these lines thus :

At the amorous words of Madeline, Porphyro grew intensely passionate. He got up from the floor where he had been kneeling. There was the glow and warmth of passion in his face and he looked an unearthly spirit or a heavenly creature. The pleasurable excitement at the words of his beloved drove away his passion and brought to his cheeks the glow of health and animation so that he looked the heavenly being whom Madeline had seen in her dream. He now looked as beautiful as a star twinkling in the calm, blue sky. And thus the Porphyro who had looked pale before became one with the Porphyro of Madeline's dream just as the smell of a rose mingles with the smell of a violet. This mingling of the real, unhappy Porphyro with the radiant Porphyro of Madeline's dream was, indeed, like a sweet solution.

#### *Stanzas 37—40*

**Note :** Porphyro now woke up Madeline from love's trance and told her that what had happened was not a dream but reality. Madeline bemoaned the possibility of Porphyro's going away and deserting her. But Porphyro assured her of his life-long devotion and sought her permission to take her away with him. He proposed that Madeline should elope with him to his home across the Moors. At Porphyro's words, Madeline hurriedly got ready, though she was full of fear. The lovers went down the stairs and passed through several doors.

**Explanation :** *A dove forlorn and lost with sick unpruned wings*—Madeline compared herself to a helpless and lonely dove who, having been sick, had not trimmed or pruned her feathers. Madeline meant to say that Porphyro's desertion of her would make her wretched and miserable.

**Explanation :** *Say may I be for aye.....saved by miracle*—Porphyro asked her if he could become her life-long slave. He would think himself fortunate if she would let him love her always. He would serve as the shield or protector of Madeline's beauty. The

shield would be shaped like a heart and it would be painted red. (This is a poetic way of saying that he would love her deeply and intensely. The heart is the seat of love and it is also the pumping station for the blood.)

Porphyro then compares himself to a pilgrim who, after a long journey to visit a holy place, arrives there tired and hungry and whom only a miracle can save from death.

(Here Madeline is the beautiful and pure shrine while Porphyro is the tired pilgrim who has at last arrived at his destination and who has been saved from going astray by a miracle.)

(*Vassal*—slave. *Vermeil dyed*—painted or coloured red.)

*The bloated wassaillers will never heed*—The swollen or drunken merry-makers will pay no attention and will not become aware of Madeline's flight.

*Drown'd all in Rhenish and the sleepy mead*—Porphyro set her fears at rest by saying that all the merry-makers were lying drunk and that they would not detect the elopement.

(*Rhenish and mead* are kinds of wines.)

**Explanation :** *The arras rich with horsemen.....along the gusty floor*—This is one of the many medieval touches in the poem. In the Middle Ages, it was customary for lords and barons and other rich people to hang tapestries as coverings for the walls. On these tapestries various scenes and situations were represented. Various figures and actions were woven into the tapestries, such as riding, hunting and hawking which were the favourite sports of those days. (Hounds were employed in the hunting of the fox, while hawks were trained to hunt down birds.) The lovers passed through several doors and crossed several rooms. On the walls of rooms hung tapestries into which the figures of riders, hawks and hunting dogs had been worked as an adornment. But as the wind blew with great force, the tapestries swung to and fro. Likewise, the long, thick carpets were tossed up by violent gusts of wind.

#### *Stanzas 41—42*

**Note :** The lovers silently and noiselessly walked into the hall, and from there to the iron gate where the porter lay drunk. They unbolted the door and slipped out in the stormy night. The watchful dog did not stop them because he recognised Madeline. In this way the two lovers fled away. That night the Baron (Madeline's father) and his warrior-guests saw many horrible dreams. Old Angela and the Beadsman died that very night and slept for ever among the dead.

**Explanation :** *And all his warrior-guests.....be-nightmar'd*—The Baron's warrior-guests too saw many dreadful visions that night in their dreams. They dreamt of witches, demons, evil spirits, and the horrible worms which feed upon the dead bodies lying in their coffins in the graves.

**Note :** There is a kind of symbolism in these lines. A fearful storm was blowing outside. The lovers had fled into the storm. The fearful dreams and night-mares of the Baron and his guests corresponded to the incident of Madeline's elopement in the storm.

**Explanation :** *And they are gone.....among his ashes cold—* This, the concluding stanza of the poem, sums up, simply but effectively, the fortunes of all the characters in the story. The two lovers slipped away into the stormy night many ages ago. That night the old Baron and his warrior-guests saw many dreadful dreams of witches, demons, and dead bodies being eaten up by worms. Thus, if a fearful storm blew outside, the inmates of the castle too had no peace. Old Angela had a stroke of paralysis that very night and she died with her thin face twisted. As for the Beadsman, he too died, after repeating his prayer to Virgin Mary a thousand times, and went to an everlasting sleep, completely forgotten by the world.

(*Thousand aves*—thousand prayers. *Ave*—a prayer addressed to Virgin Mary.)

## II. ODE TO PSYCHE

### 1. Introduction

In a letter to his brother, Keats wrote that this was the first poem with which he had taken even moderate pains. He believed that the poem would read the more richly because of the leisurely manner in which he had written it. He also explained in the letter that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and that the goddess was never worshipped with any of the ancient fervour. Keats did not wish to let a heathen goddess remain neglected. He, therefore, wrote this poem as a tribute to her.

**The legend of Psyche :** Psyche was a damsel so beautiful that Venus became jealous of her. Venus sent Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with some ugly creature, but Cupid himself fell in love with her. He placed her in a palace, but only visited her in the dark and forbade her to attempt to see him. Her sisters from jealousy told her that her lover was a monster and would devour her. One night she secretly lighted a lamp, and looked at Cupid when he was asleep. Amazed and agitated at the sight of his beauty, she let fall on him a drop of oil from the lamp, and woke him. Thereupon the god left her, angry at her disobedience. Psyche, lonely and repentant, searched for her lover all over the earth. Venus imposed various superhuman tasks upon her which, however, she was able to accomplish, except the last. Jupiter, at Cupid's entreaty, at last consented to her marriage to her lover, and she was taken to heaven and deified. The myth symbolises the purification of the human soul by passion and suffering.

Psyche is the Greek word for the soul. Keats seems to regard Psyche not only as the personification of the human soul but also as the personification of beauty.

## 2. Critical Summary

Addressing the divinity, Psyche, Keats says that he is writing this poem under a sweet compulsion and in order to record his feeling of affection for her. He seeks her pardon for singing her secrets into her own soft and shell-shaped ear. He then goes on to describe what he thinks might have been a dream or an actual experience. Wandering in a forest thoughtlessly, he was astonished to see two lovely creatures lying side by side in deep grass under the leaves and blossoms of trees, near a stream which was hardly visible. The two lovely creatures lay in the midst of silent, cool and sweet-smelling flowers of blue, silver-white, and purple colours. They lay in an embrace. Their lips did not touch but seemed to have temporarily parted to renew their kisses very soon. Keats recognised the winged boy as Cupid, the god of love, but he was a little doubtful about the identity of the goddess who was most probably Psyche, the devoted and loyal beloved of Cupid. (Lines 1—23)

Keats addresses Psyche as the latest-born and the loveliest of all the gods and goddesses who lived on Mount Olympus. He considers her to be fairer than the moon-star, Venus, and fairer also than Vesper (that is, the evening star). It is unfortunate, however, that Psyche was never made the object of worship in ancient times because she became a goddess too late. Describing the paraphernalia of religious worship, Keats laments the fact that Psyche did not receive her due as a goddess. No temple was built to her ; no altar was heaped with flowers as a tribute to her ; no choir of virgins sang songs in their sweet and low voices in honour of her ; she did not receive any tribute in the form of the music of the lute or the pipe or in the form of incense burning in censers ; no priest showed any fervour of worship in relation to her or uttered prophecies on her behalf. She was certainly the brightest of all the divinities, but she came too late for ancient vows, and too late for the lyric poets of antiquity to celebrate her. The ancient people believed that divinities lived amongst the trees, in the air, in water, and in fire ; but because Psyche attained the status of a divinity when the age of mythical beliefs had almost passed, she was not worshipped. This fact does not, however, discourage the poet from paying his tribute to her. He can see her even in these days which are so far removed from the ancient ages of mythical beliefs. The poet himself will serve as her choir, and sing sweet songs in her honour ; he will himself serve as her lute, her pipe, her sweet incense, her shrine, her oracle, and her priest. (Lines 24—49)

The poet re-iterates that he will himself act as a priest or worshipper of Psyche. He will build a temple to her in some unexplored region of his own mind. In that region of his mind, new thoughts will grow like branches of pine trees and will make him experience a feeling of pain accompanied by pleasure. His mind will serve as a forest and his thoughts will serve as pine-trees. There, in that region of his mind, will the wood-nymphs lie asleep on the moss

in the midst of streams, birds, and bees, with cool breezes blowing around. In the midst of such an extensive and peaceful region, the poet would build a rose-covered shrine for Psyche and he will worship her with the loveliest buds and blossoms of verse which the gardener Fancy can produce. Fancy, the gardener, has an infinite productive capacity and does not repeat herself. The poet, using his Fancy, will provide for Psyche all those soft pleasures which his brain can devise. He will also provide a bright torch in the open window of the temple so that Psyche may be able to enter the temple. (Lines 50—67)

(In the concluding stanza, Keats expresses his idea by means of an elaborate metaphor. "His mind is the forest, full of the varied beauty of Nature and myth : his thoughts are the pine trees, in the midst of which he will build a temple dedicated to the worship of Psyche ; the flowers are apparently his verses, tended by the gardener Fancy, and the rose-clad temple of poetry is to be prepared and thrown open for the entrance of Psyche. Probably by the 'fane' he means the ode which, with this beautiful imagery, he brings to a close.")

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**The poet's worship of Psyche :** This ode is addressed to Psyche, a king's beautiful daughter with whom Cupid, the god of love, fell in love and who was, after many vicissitudes, united with him. It was only in the age of Apuleius (in the second century A.D.) that Psyche was given the status of a divinity and it is for this reason that Keats refers to her as the latest born of all the gods and goddesses who had their abode on Mount Olympus. Keats emphasises the fact that Psyche was not made immortal till the days of simple religious faith and observance were gone by and he, therefore, deplores the fact that Psyche has never been duly worshipped. In the ode, Keats offers himself as her worshipper. However, he seems to regard Psyche as the personification of Beauty rather than of the human soul which she is normally believed to symbolise. (Psyche is the Greek word for the soul.) In a letter to George, Keats wrote : "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius, the Platonist, who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion. I am more orthodox than to let a heathen goddess be so neglected."

**Sensuous imagery :** The poem is remarkable for its concrete and sensuous imagery, which constitutes one of the most striking characteristics of Keats's poetry. There is, first of all, the lovely picture of Cupid and Psyche lying in an embrace in deep grass, beneath a roof of leaves and blossoms, by the side of a brooklet. Keats imagines the two fair creatures

couched side by side

In deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof  
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran  
A brooklet, scarce espied :

The lovers lay in the midst of flowers of varied colours. We get one of the most exquisite pictures in Keats's poetry in the two lines in which he describes with an unsurpassed felicity of word and phrase, the flowers of different colours :

'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed,  
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian.....

The use of the compound epithets 'cool-rooted' and 'fragrant-eyed' shows Keats's genius for original phrase-making. Another sensuous picture follows in the lines where the lovers are described as lying with lips that touched not but which had not at the same time bidden farewell :

As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love.....

Keats means that on waking up the two lovers will start kissing each other again and that the number of their kisses this time will exceed the number of kisses they have already exchanged before falling asleep.

Concrete and sensuous imagery continues in the poem when Keats describes the superior beauty of Psyche as compared with Venus and Vesper. Venus and Vesper are themselves described in lovely phrases : "Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star" ; and "Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky". Psyche is not only the latest-born but also the loveliest of all the half-forgotten gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. Then follows a description of the paraphernalia of worship in a temple ; altar, virgin-choir, lute, pipe, sweet incense burning in a chain-swung censer, shrine, oracle, the fervour of a priest.

In the concluding stanza, we have more of concrete and sensuous imagery. We are given pictures of a forest, wild-ridged mountains, streams, birds, breezes, and wood-nymphs lulled to sleep. One of the most exquisite pictures comes at the end where we see a bright torch burning in the casement to make it possible for Cupid to enter the temple in order to make love to Psyche.

**Intensity of feeling :** The poem is characterised by passion and fervour. There is intense feeling and ardent enthusiasm in the lines in which Keats pledges himself to the worship of Psyche. There is a mood of regret in the lines where the poet says that Psyche came too late for "antique vows" and for "the fond-believing lyre". But the regret is momentary. Keats will himself compensate Psyche for the neglect she has suffered from. He will become her choir in order to "make a moan upon the midnight hours". He will serve as her shrine, her grove, her oracle, and her priest. He will build a temple dedicated to her in "some untrodden region" of his mind. He will provide for her "all soft delight" that his brain can devise. The beauty-loving nature of Keats is perfectly at home in the treatment of the theme of this poem.

**The final metaphor :** The elaborate and fantastic metaphor of the final stanza is noteworthy. The poet regards his mind as a forest which is full of the varied beauty of Nature and myth. His thoughts are the pine trees in the midst of which he will build a temple dedicated to the worship of Psyche. The buds, blossoms, and stars are obviously his verses nourished and tended by the gardener Fancy who has an unlimited productive capacity, and who "breeding flowers, will never breed the same".

**Original phrases :** The poem shows also Keats's unique gift for phrase-making. We have an abundance of exquisite compound epithets which not only convey the writer's meaning aptly and vividly but also enhance the sensuous appeal of the poem. The most striking of these compound epithets are : "soft-conched ear"; "cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed"; "calm-breathing"; "soft-handed slumber"; "sapphire-region'd star"; "chain-swung censer"; "dark-cluster'd trees"; "moss-lain Dryads."

Commenting on this poem, L. M. Jones\* says : "Psyche symbolises, of course, the soul in the old sense of the word, the sum-total of the human consciousness. For Keats, we may be sure, a most important component of that consciousness was the imagination. In promising to worship Psyche, he was announcing his intention allegorically of becoming a psychological poet, of analysing the human soul, of glorifying the imagination, of studying the human mind in order to show how an awareness of its complexity could enrich human experience.....It is especially appropriate that Keats chose Psyche as his object of worship, because for him the best means of approaching the immortal world was through the use of most active ingredient of the human soul, the imagination. A simple belief in the old gods was no longer possible, but man was not therefore doomed to mere animality. He might still employ the imagination to break through the bonds of the mortal and finite. Psyche was an excellent symbol for the imagination as an instrument to bridge the gap between the mortal and immortal because she stood between both : she had been mortal and she became a goddess."

David Perkins thus comments upon the idea of the last stanza : "But most of all one wonders about the frank recognition that the visionary poet must work subjectively, that because the poet worships Psyche in an unbelieving world, the worship must be private. It can exist only in the mind, and even in some untrdden region of the mind, a place set apart and secluded where other processes of cognition will not intrude. In other words, the visionary and the mortal worlds cannot be known simultaneously, and the poet must protectively isolate the vision in order to enjoy it. To the extent that he consecrates his own mind as a shrine to Psyche, he retreats from confronting 'the agonies, the strife of human hearts'. The very clear recognition of this which the ode expresses later became one reason for rejecting an openly visionary poetry. In the ode itself, however,

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\* in *An Allegorical Introduction To Keats's Great Odes.*

these implications seem to be more than acknowledged ; they are welcomed, and the poet expresses a firm resolve to protect his vision from the withering touch of actuality."

### Kenneth Allott on the 'Ode To Psyche'

Robert Bridges has written of the "extreme beauty" of the last stanza of this ode and has ranked the whole poem above *On a Grecian Urn* (though not above *On Melancholy*). T. S. Eliot has also given high praise to this ode. In the opinion of Kenneth Allott, *To Psyche* is neither flawless nor the best of Keats's odes, but to him it illustrates better than any other Keats's possession of poetic power combined with what was for him an unusual artistic detachment. It is also a remarkable poem in its own right. It is the most architectural of his odes, and it is certainly the one that culminates most dramatically.

Kenneth Allott goes on to observe firstly that the poem opens badly but warms up rapidly after a weak start and, secondly, while the poem is a happy one, its tone is more exactly described if the happiness is thought of as defensive or defiant.

The poem moves through three stages. In the first stage (Lines 1-23), Keats sets out to praise Psyche as the neglected goddess whose sufferings and mistakes represent the inevitable conditions of human experience. She has achieved "identity" and lasting happiness. Love is her companion. Keats uses the convention of a sudden vision or waking dream which comes to him when he is wandering thoughtlessly :

Surely I dreamt today, or did I see  
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes ?  
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly.....

The vision of Psyche and "the winged boy" in their Eden-like retreat draws some of its richness from descriptions of embowered lovers in Spenser and Milton. The tone of this first stanza is contented, even cool, except for the touch of feeling conveyed by the repetition "O happy, happy dove."

The second stage of the poem covers lines 24-49. Keats passes easily from the neglect of Psyche to the fading and wearing out of the belief in all the gods and goddesses, and then to a regretful expression of feeling for the largeness of life in an age when all Nature was still "holy", all enjoyment whole-hearted, and every herdsman or shepherd the poet of his own pleasure. The contrast is with a present which is a twilight for poetic and mythological moods of thoughts. The march of mind has upset the balance of our natures, and the simple enjoyment of an experience has become difficult. However, Psyche's worship will not be curtailed or abridged by the poet even though he lives in an age of unbelief.

The third and final stage of the poem consists of lines 50-67, beginning with the emphatic assertion : "Yes, I will be thy priest..." The whole of this last stanza, consisting of a single long but quite coherent sentence, develops its momentum quietly at first, then

confidently, and finally with exultation at its climax in the last four lines. The defiance of Lines 24-35 gives way to confidence as Keats comes to see how he can worship Psyche. He will do so by keeping "some untrodden region" of his mind as a safe refuge where Psyche or the soul may unfold all her powers in a landscape and climate wholly kind and friendly. The lines here construct the remoteness and peaceful seclusion of a valley :

Far, far around shall those dark cluster'd trees  
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep ;  
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,  
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep. (Lines 54-57)

The description comes to a focus on Psyche's refuge or shrine :

And in the midst of this wide quietness  
A rosy sanctuary will I dress..... (Lines 58-59)

A complex image, accumulated from these details, is being offered as the equivalent of a mental state which may be negatively defined by what it excludes. Calculation, anxiety and deliberate activity are shut out. The "wide quietness" of the valley represents a mood in which the soul will be able to breathe freely. In this mood, poetry, here defined as "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain" may be coaxed to put forth its buds and bells and nameless stars. The soul is promised a rich indolence which will safeguard its natural gift for delight. This sanctuary will be made lovely and inviting with all the resources of a poetic imagination, and these resources are infinite for Fancy "breeding flowers, 'will never breed the same.'" In this luxurious abode, Psyche will be disposed to welcome the visits of love (whose "soft delight" was still for Keats the soul's "chief intensity"). Perhaps the final implications are (a) that whole-heartedness can never be lost while Psyche is willing to welcome love in at her casement; and (b) that love, poetry and indolence are the natural medicines of the soul against the living death it must accept from cold philosophy.

#### Harold Bloom on the 'Ode to Psyche'

Keats begins his poem by giving us a picture of Eros and Psyche lying in an embrace. Keats is not sure whether he has seen the lovers in a dream or "with awaken'd eyes" in a vision of reality, but either way he has seen them. He finds them at that moment of Keatsian intensity when they are neither apart nor joined together, but rather in an embrace scarcely ended and another about to commence. Eros he recognises immediately, but Psyche is revealed to him in a moment of astonished perception. (Lines 1-23).

The next two stanzas (Lines 24-35 and 36-49) are contrary to each other in emphasis and meaning. In the first, the machinery of worship—altar, choir, voice, lute, pipe, incense, shrine, grove and oracle, and "heat of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming"—is subtly deprecated. In the second, though the wording is almost the same, the apparatus of worship is humanised and commended. This

heathen goddess, Psyche, is the human-soul-in-love, which can well dispense with the outward worship ironically regretted in the second stanza, but which deserves and needs the inner worship of the imagination that is offered to it in the third stanza. (Lines 36-49).

The irony of the second stanza (Lines 24-35) should not be missed. The Olympian gods and goddesses have almost been forgotten, and Psyche is the loveliest of them who are still evident. The other surviving Olympians are Phoebe and Aphrodite and they live only in the light of the moon and the evening star. They were worshipped by the ancients ; but Psyche was not. However, Psyche is now fairer than either of them. The details of worship in the second stanza seem a little ludicrous. Keats seems to be attacking the outer ceremonials of religion itself, and not just the Olympian worship. The choir is of virgins, and they make "delicious moan" at midnight. This is a sly hint of the sexual sublimation in aspects of worship. Then comes a long list of negative properties (no voice, no lute, no pipe, etc.). The absence of these properties makes them seem ridiculous also until the climax comes with reference to the pale-mouth'd prophet who seems to long for Phoebe or Aphrodite. The element of sexual suppression is again subtly conveyed.

Seeing Psyche, Keats knows her, and moves to a union with her in which he becomes a god, a movement of incarnation. The poet is born in his own mind as he moves to become a priest of Psyche ; and as a priest he participates in humanistic and naturalistic communion, an act of the imagination which is a kind of natural supernaturalism. In the passage ending the third stanza (Lines 36-49), the change from "no voice" and "no lute" to "thy voice" and "thy lute" utterly transforms the same phrasing employed earlier. The entire paraphernalia of worship is transformed in this internalisation. Not only is Keats himself substituted for the deliciously moaning virgin choir, but Keats's poem, the *Ode To Psyche*, which he is in the act of composing, becomes the "moan upon the midnight hours".

The voice, the lute, and the pipe become emblems of the poem that features them. The sweet incense rises from the poem itself as a "swung censer teeming", and identified also with Keats himself. The shrine becomes the temple that Keats will build in his own mind ; the grove, the visionary foliage that will rise there as "branched thoughts". The oracle or prophet will be Keats in his role of the figure of the youth as virile poet. Keats identifies himself as a prophet of the loving human soul.

In the last stanza the poet declares that the paradise for the soul is to be built by the poet's imagination within the poet's own consciousness. Psyche's temple will be built "in some untrodden region" of Keats's mind. To build Psyche's temple is to widen consciousness. But an increase in consciousness carries with it the dual capacity for pleasure or for pain. The thoughts that will grow

like branches in that untrodden region will be grown "with pleasant pain". The branched thoughts, in this inner nature, replace pines, and murmur in the wind of inspiration.

The mountains and other phenomena mentioned in lines 54-57 are all within the mind. The pastoral landscape is completed by the Dryads who find their repose in this mental paradise. Having created a more ideal Nature, Keats proceeds to provide within it a sanctuary for Psyche. He refers to the function of his working brain within a general consciousness as being that of a "wreath'd trellis" a gardener's support for clinging vines. Psyche's rosy sanctuary is dressed not only with buds and bells but with "stars without a name". What follows is the triumph of Keats's *Ode*, and the most complex effect in it : the sombre but defiant acknowledgement of "invention's limits", and the closing declaration of the human love that surmounts even imaginative limitations :

A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
To let the warm Love in !

Keats closes his ode with an image of an open casement, through which the warm Love, Psyche's Eros, shall yet enter.

There is a play, in these final lines, upon the familiar myth of Eros and Psyche which Keats has put aside in the main body of his ode. The mythical love of Eros and Psyche was an act in darkness ; the bright torch burns in the natural tower of consciousness which Keats has built for the lovers' shrine. The open casement may remind us of the magic casements that open on the faery vision of the *Nightingale* ode. Here it emphasises the openness of the imagination toward the heart's affections.

#### Sidney Colvin on the '*Ode to Psyche*'

' In this ode, Keats employs a stanza of a lengthened type approaching those of Spenser's nuptial odes, but not regularly repeated. Keats had long been enamoured of the theme of this poem, as the following lines in the opening poem of his first book show :

So felt he, who first told how Psyche went  
On the smooth wind to realms of wonderment.

There are in this poem some cloying touches of the kind too common in his love-scenes ; but they are more than compensated by the exquisite freshness of the natural scenery in the midst of which the mythical lovers lie in an embrace : "Mid, hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed". Perhaps no other poet has compressed into a single line so much of the true life and charm of flowers, of their power to stir the spirit of man through all his senses at once. Such felicity in compound epithets is by this time habitual with Keats, and he has become the equal of Spenser with his "sea-shouldering whales". In *St. Agnes' Eve*, we have the exquisite phrase : "The azure-lidded sleep" of Madeline. In this ode we have such phrases as the "moss-lain Dryads", and the "soft-conched ear" of Psyche. However, it must be admitted that there is something

strained in the turn of thought and expression whereby the poet offers himself and the homage of his own mind to Psyche, the homage which he wishes to pay to her in lieu of the worship of antiquity which she was denied because she came too late. The metaphor with which the famous fourth stanza opens ("Yes, I will be thy priest", etc.) has especially this particular flaw. Yet over such difficulties the true lover of poetry will find himself swiftly carried, until he pauses breathless and delighted at the entrance to the sanctuary prepared by the "gardener Fancy". The reader's ear is here charmed by the glow and music of the verse, with its hurrying pace and the reader's mind is enthralled by the beauty of the invocation of the imagery.

### ODE TO PSYCHE

O Goddess ! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung  
 By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,  
 And pardon that thy secrets should be sung,  
 Even into thine own soft-conched ear :  
 Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see 5  
 The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes ?  
 I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,  
 And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,  
 Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side  
 In deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof 10  
 Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran  
 A brooklet, scarce espied :  
 'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers fragrant-eyed,  
 Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,  
 They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass, 15  
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too ;  
 Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
 And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
 At tender eye-dawn of auorean love : 20  
 The winged boy I knew ;  
 But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove ?  
 His Psyche true !  
 O latest-born and loveliest vision far  
 Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy ! 25  
 Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,  
 Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky ;  
 Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none  
 Nor altar heap'd with flowers ;  
 Nor Virgin-choir to make delicious moan 30  
 Upon the midnight hours ;  
 No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet  
 From chain-swung censer teeming ;  
 No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. 35

- O brightest ! though too late for antique vows,  
 Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,  
 When holy were the haunted forest boughs.  
 Holy the air, the water, and the fire ;  
 Yet even in these days so far retired                                  40  
     From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,  
     Fluttering among the faint Olympians,  
 I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.  
     So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
     Upon the midnight hours !                                          45
- Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
     From swinged censer teeming :  
 Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
     Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.
- Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane                          50  
     In some untrodden region of my mind,  
 Where branched thoughts, new-grown with pleasant pain,  
     Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind :  
 Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees  
     Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep ;                  55  
 And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,  
     The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep ;  
 And in the midst of this wide quietness  
 A rosy sanctuary will I dress  
 With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,  
     With buds, and bells, and stars without a name.                          60
- With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,  
     Who, breeding flowers, will never breed the same :  
 And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
     That shadowy thought can win,                                          65  
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
     To let the warm Love in !

#### 4. Explanations

##### *Lines 1—12*

*O Goddess !.....soft-conched ear* (Lines 1-4)—Keats addresses Psyche, the beloved of Eros (or Cupid, the god of love), and tells her that he is writing these unmusical verses pertaining to her and seeks her forgiveness that he should be speaking in these verses about her secrets into her own soft and shell-shaped ears. He is writing these verses under a sweet compulsion because he cherishes precious memories of her. (He calls his verses tuneless or unmusical on account of his sense of modesty.) By her secrets, he means her love-episode with Cupid. The phrase "soft-conched" is noteworthy. It calls up a beautiful picture of the soft and shell-shaped ears of Psyche. (*Conch*—a sea-shell).

*Explanation : Surely I dreamt today.....scarce espied* (Lines 5-12)—The poet says that, wandering in a forest in a careless, dreamy

mood, he almost fainted with surprise on seeing two beautiful creatures lying side by side. These two creatures lay in thick grass, under a roof of whispering leaves of trees and under the blossoms which had been set trembling by the wind. Nearby flowed a stream, screened from sight and almost invisible. Keats is not sure whether he saw these two creatures in a dream or whether he saw them (one of them being the winged Psyche) with wakeful eyes. (Keats's mood here is one of inertia and of suspension between sleeping and waking.) (*Winged Psyche*—Psyche is represented as having wings similar to those of a butterfly.)

(*With awaken'd eyes*—This phrase refers to Keats himself. He is not sure whether he saw Psyche in a dream or whether he saw her with wakeful eyes. *Thoughtlessly*—in a careless, dreamy mood. *Trembled blossoms*—blossoms set trembling by the wind.)

### *Lines 13—23*

'*Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers.....Psyche true!* (Lines 13-23)—The two creatures lay in the midst of the silent, sweet-smelling flowers having their roots in the cool ground underneath. The flowers were of various colours—blue, silver-white, and deep purple like the dye made at Tyre. The two lovers lay breathing peacefully on the grass which served as a bed for them. Their arms and their wings were locked in an embrace. Their lips did not touch, but they had not bidden farewell either. It seemed as if the soft sleep into which they had fallen had interrupted their kissing and that, on waking up at dawn, they would resume their love-making in the course of which their kisses would far exceed in number the kisses they had already exchanged. The poet says that he immediately recognised the winged boy as Cupid but that it meant some effort to realise that his companion was Cupid's faithful beloved, Psyche, happy and gentle as a dove.

**Note :** The first two lines (13-14) of this stanza have greatly been admired for their sensuous appeal and for the compound epithets "cool-rooted" and "fragrant-eyed". It has been pointed out that every beauty that flowers possess—scent, form, stillness, coolness, colouring—is conveyed by these two lines.

*Tyrian* conveys the idea of the purple dye obtained from Mediterranean shell-fish and exported from Tyre, an ancient city.

*At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love* (Line 20)—Aurora is the name of the goddess of dawn. The line conveys the idea of young lovers opening their eyelids, like the opening eyelids of the morning.

Lines 16—20 again have a sensuous appeal. They contain a picture of the passionate love-making of Cupid and Psyche, love-making which has been interrupted by sleep but which will soon be resumed.

### *Lines 24—35*

**Explanation:** *O latest-born and loveliest vision far.....prophet dreaming* (Lines 34-35)—Keats calls Psyche the latest-born

and the loveliest of all the forgotten gods and goddesses who were believed to have their abode on Mount Olympus. She is the latest-born because she was embodied as a goddess very late (that is, in the time of Apuleius, the Platonist). She is the loveliest because Keats is writing this poem to glorify the neglected goddess. Psyche is regarded as being more beautiful than the moon-star—Venus. She is also more beautiful than Vesper that gives out bright light and looks like an amorous glow-worm of the sky. Psyche is more beautiful than these, even though she had no temple dedicated to her worship, no altar heaped with flowers, no choir of virgins to sing sweet songs of worship at midnight, no lute, no pipe, no sweet incense burning in censers hanging from chains, no shrine, nor grove, no oracle, no priest to worship her in a trance.

*Olympus' faded hierarchy* (Line 25)—This phrase refers to the forgotten gods and goddesses who were believed to live on Mount Olympus. The word "hierarchy" is used because the gods and goddesses had their respective ranks in divine government.

*Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star*—Phoebe is another name for Diana, the moon-goddess. The sapphire-region'd star is the planet Venus, shining in the sapphire blue of a summer evening sky.

*Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky*—Vesper or the morning star is beautifully described as an amorous glow-worm emitting its light in the sky above.

*Nor Virgin-choir.....midnight hours* (Lines 30—31)—Different gods and goddesses had their own respective temples in which they were worshipped. A group of virgins would constitute a choir to sing songs of worship at midnight hours in these temples. But, as no temple had been built in honour of Psyche, she had no choir of virgins to sing for her.

*No incense sweet.....censer teeming* (Lines 32—33)—Incense is a fragrant substance which is burnt in temples and other places of worship. A censer is a receptacle in which incense is burnt. "Chain-swung censer" means censer attached to a chain and swaying gently from side to side. "Teeming" refers to the abundance of incense in the censer.

*Shrine, grove, oracle*—All the three words mean a place of worship.

*No heat of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming*—This refers to the enthusiasm or fervour of the priest who worshipped a particular deity and who, in a state of trance, gave answers to questions put by people to that deity.

**Note:** A shrine or an oracle was a place of worship where answers were given by a particular deity through the mouth of his or her priest. The most famous of these shrines was that of Apollo, situated at Delphi. Here the priestess of the god, seated on a tripod over a fissure in the rock, uttered in a divine ecstasy answers to the questions of the visitors to the temple. The answers were uttered by the

priestess in incoherent words which were then interpreted by a priest and which were supposed to come directly from Apollo. The oracle at Delphi was primarily concerned with questions of religion, how in particular circumstances men were to be reconciled with the gods, and evil averted. In such matters, this oracle was the supreme authority in Greece.

Keats says that there is no shrine or oracle where a priest or priestess can speak on behalf of Psyche. What Keats is emphasising is the fact that Psyche, having been raised to the status of a deity too late, has neither a temple dedicated to her worship nor any priest to offer formal worship to her.

#### *Lines 36—49*

**Explanation :** *O brightest ! though too late.....prophet dreaming* (Lines 36-49)—Keats addresses Psyche as the brightest of all the gods and goddesses. No doubt, she appeared so late on the scene that no temples were built for her worship. She came so late that no poets could celebrate her in their lyrical verses. In ancient times people used to believe in the existence of deities in the trees, in the air, in the water, and in the fire. Those were the days of Nature-worship when different objects of Nature were believed to have their different deities. Keats is living in times which are far removed from those ancient days of mythological beliefs. Those were the days of happy pieties, that is, happy worship of the divinities. But even in these days Keats, drawing inspiration from within himself, is able to see the bright wings of Psyche fluttering among the forgotten gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus. He is able to see Psyche even in these days when people no longer believe in gods and goddesses, and he is able to pay a tribute to her by means of a song. The poet will himself, therefore, act as Psyche's choir and sings hymns of praise to her at midnight. He will himself serve as her voice, her lute, her pipe, and her incense burning in the censer hung from a chain. He will himself take the place of her shrine, her grove, her oracle, and her inspired priest uttering prophecies on her behalf in a trance.

The poet means that he will himself perform all the duties and functions of worship in honour of Psyche. He will thus fill the gap which has remained unfilled so long.

#### *Lines 50—67*

**Explanation :** *Yes, I will be thy priest.....to let the warm Love in* (Lines 50-67)—Keats pledges himself to the worship of the neglected goddess, Psyche. He will build a temple to her in some private, unvisited region of his mind. In that region of his mind, thoughts will grow like branches and shall murmur in the wind of inspiration like pine-trees murmuring in a forest. These thoughts will grow painfully but their growth will also yield a pleasure: The steeps of the wild-ridged mountains in that region of his mind will be covered with dark clusters of trees, and there the Dryads or the tree-nymphs, lying on the moss, will fall asleep while listening to the

sounds of breezes, streams, birds and bees. In the midst of this wide and quiet region, the poet will prepare a rosy altar which he will adorn with interwoven fancies and with buds, blossoms, and nameless stars which his imagination, working like a gardener, can produce. This gardener, namely his imagination, is so fertile that it will go on producing an endless variety of flowers. The poet will provide for Psyche's pleasure all the joys that his imagination can create. He will keep the window of the temple open at night and will place a bright torch in it so that the warm-hearted lover of Psyche can enter and make love to her in her abode.

(*Fane*—temple. *In some untrodden region of my mind*—in some unvisited and unexplored region of the poet's brain. *Branched thoughts*—thoughts growing like branches. *New-grown with pleasant pain*—New thoughts will grow in that region of his mind, and the growing of these thoughts will cause to the poet a pleasant pain. To build Psyche's temple is to widen consciousness : and an increase in consciousness carries with it the dual capacity for pleasure and for pain. These branched thoughts will take the place of pines which grow in a forest, and these thoughts will murmur in the wind of inspiration.

*Zephyrs*—breezes. *Moss-lain Dryads*—tree-nymphs lying on the moss. *Sanctuary*—holy place. *Wreath'd trellis*—an interwoven framework which serves as a support for vines. Here the phrase means the interwoven fancies which Keats's working brain will produce as an adornment for the sanctuary. *Buds, and bells, and stars without a name*—The poet means that he will adorn the temple of Psyche with his beautiful verses which he describes as buds, blossoms, and stars without a name. *Gardener Fancy*—The poet's imagination is here regarded as a gardener who grows all kinds of flowers that he can think of. The poet's fancy will produce different kinds of verses in honour of Psyche. *Who breeding flowers will never breed the same*—The poet's fancy will produce an endless variety of flowers, or an endless variety of verses. ("The gardener in an ordinary garden can produce, by grafting and so on, new varieties ; but this skill is small compared with the creative fertility of the poet, whose flowers of verse are never twice alike").

*A casement ope at night*—a window kept open at night. *To let the warm Love in*—to make it possible for Cupid, the ardent lover of Psyche, to enter the temple and make love to her. ("To let the warm love in" has also been interpreted as referring to Psyche herself. In other words, the window will be open to let Psyche enter the temple.)

"In these lines (50—67), Keats develops in detail his fantastic metaphor. His mind is the forest, full of the varied beauty of Nature and myth ; his thoughts are the pine trees, in the midst of which he will build a fane or temple dedicated to the worship of Psyche ; the flowers are apparently his verses, tended by the gardener Fancy, and

the rose-clad temple of poetry is to be prepared and thrown open for the entrance of Psyche. Probably by the fane he means the ode, which with this beautiful imagery he brings to a close."

### III. ODE ON INDOLENCE

#### 1. Introduction

As the title shows, this is an ode on the subject of indolence or languor. It is a poem in which the writer expresses a mood of laziness when the activities and exertions of life do not seem to be worth while. The poet says that he would like to continue in his mood of indolence and would not like to be stirred to effort of any kind. Even love, ambition, and poesy are unable to pull him out of this mood in which he would like merely to dream away his hours.

In a letter written to a friend in March, 1819, Keats almost gave a paraphrase of this poem. He wrote : "This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless. I long after a stanza or two of Thompson's *Castle of Indolence*. My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over to a delightful sensation about three degrees this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lilies I should call it languor—but as I am I must call it laziness. In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry nor Ambition nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me : they seem rather like three figures on a Greek vase—a man and two women whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguise. This is the only happiness ; and it is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the mind."

The poem conveys the ideas contained in the passage quoted above. Keats affirms that neither love, ambition nor poetry has charm enough to tempt him from a mood of exquisite somnolence or indolence.

#### 2. Critical Summary

Keats says that one morning he saw three figures, with joined hands, passing before him one after the other. The figures passed, like figures on a marble urn when shifted round. The figures came a second time, as when the urn is once more shifted round. The figures were strange to Keats because he could not recognise who they were. (*Stanza 1*).

The poet wanted to know who the figures were. They appeared before him in a quiet disguise and it seemed that they had formed a plot to steal away and to let him spend his idle days without a task. It was the drowsy hour of the noon. His eyes were almost over-powered by a feeling of laziness. His pulse was beating more and

more slowly. In that mood pain had no sting for him, and pleasure had no joy for him. He asked the figures why they did not melt and leave his mind a blank. (*Stanza 2*).

The figures passed before the poet a third time and this time, as they passed, each turned its face for a moment towards the poet and then faded. This time the poet longed to follow them because he had recognised them. The first was a fair maiden by the name of Love ; the second was Ambition, pale of cheek and watchful of eyes ; and the third was a proud maiden by the name of Poesy,\* the poet's guardian spirit. (*Stanza 3*).

The figures faded, and the poet was filled with an intense desire to follow them. He wished he had wings to do so. But the very next moment he found fault with himself for having such a desire. After all, he told himself, love was something unreal ; ambition was a kind of fever-fit experienced by the little heart of man ; and, as for poesy, it could not afford to give to the poet that feeling of contentment and happiness which he experienced at that hour of the drowsy noon in a mood of sweet indolence. Realising the futility of love, ambition, and poesy, the poet desired to spend a long long time in a mood of laziness in which he would not even be aware of the change of seasons and would not have to hear the voices of busy people preaching common sense to him. (*Stanza 4*).

The figures returned a fourth time, and the poet wanted to know why they were trying to disturb him. His sleep had been made sweeter with faint dreams. His soul had been like a lawn covered with flowers and shades. He did not therefore want his attention to be diverted by those three figures. It was a cloudy morning when the air smelt of coming rain. The poet was in a mood of a simple sensuous awareness, calm and yet somehow keen. It would have been well if the ghostly figures of Love, Ambition, and Poesy had left him immediately, while he was still plunged in dreamy indolence. He did not wish those figures to persist in attracting his attention and in trying to rouse him to the kind of work which was sure to bring suffering and tears. (*Stanza 5*).

The poet then finally made up his mind to bid farewell to the three ghostly figures. In his mood of indolence he felt like a man with his head buried in a bed of cool, flowery grass. He did not wish to run after love or ambition or poetry. He had no desire to win praise or admiration from the public by writing poems. He did not wish to be petted by the public and fed with flattery. So he called upon those three figures to fade away and to return no more. He had an ample store of dreams and visions to spend his nights and days in a mood of honied indolence. (*Stanza 6*).

### 3. Critical Appreciation

This poem celebrates a mood of indolence and may, therefore, be compared to Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters* and to Robert Bridges's

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\*Poesy—the poetic art.

*Indolence.* In this mood, which is one of "honied indolence", Keats rejects love, ambition, and poetry which are, broadly speaking, the principal incentives to effort and endeavour for a man like him. One who is in love makes earnest efforts to attain the fulfilment of his love. One who is ambitious puts in the maximum possible labour to attain his ambition. One who is bewitched by the spirit of poetry will spend days and nights in developing his poetic art. But, in his mood of languor, Keats rejects all the three activities and wishes to be left alone to dream away his idle hours. In other words, he prefers indolence to love, ambition, or even the exercise of his poetic art. He is reluctant to face the labour and strife to which they call him, and he wishes to relapse into dreams of which, he says, he has an ample store.

"This ode represents one side of Keats's genius—its sensuous, dreamy, pleasure-loving element. Keats owned to having an exquisite appreciation of the beautiful, and here he declares himself willing to yield to it even at the expense of manly energy and resolve. It is a mood only, and a mood to which bodily weakness probably contributes something, for Keats had not at that time the stock of vitality natural to a man of three and twenty." It would be absolutely wrong to look upon this poem as a statement of Keats's philosophy of life. The poem is as much the expression of a passing mood, as Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters*. At no stage in his life did Keats really give way to the intense longing for rest which he expresses here in this poem. The poem expresses a mood which even the most active and energetic natures occasionally experience, a mood in which nothing seems worth while.

The poem contains a number of pictures which are vividly depicted and which bear witness to Keats's gift of concrete imagery. The three figures which pass before him are described as stepping one behind the other, and looking serene "in placid sandals, and in white robes graced". Each of the figures is given a separate life and is fully individualised. Love is described as a fair maid; Ambition as pale of cheek, and "ever watchful with fatigued eye"; and Poesy as a "maiden most unmeek". We have some more imagery when the poet tells us that his sleep had been "embroider'd with dim dreams", and his soul "had been a lawn besprinkled o'er with flowers and stirring shades". A lovely picture of a cloudy morning when the air smells of coming rain is given in the following lines :

The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,  
Tho' in her lids hung the sweet tears of May :

Another beautiful picture is that of an open casement, with "a new-leaved vine" pressing against it, and letting in "the budding warmth and throstle's lay".

The mood of indolence is successfully and effectively built up in the poem. Ripe was the drowsy hour. The blissful cloud of summer-indolence overwhelmed the poet's eyes. The poet's pulse grew less and less. In that mood, pain had no sting for him, and pleasure had

no joy ; in other words, he was indifferent to both pain and pleasure. This description communicates the mood of indolence to the reader as well. The mood of indolence is briefly interrupted when the poet experiences a desire to follow the three figures, but the very next moment the poet realises the futility of the pursuit and returns to his original mood when he describes the "drowsy noons" as sweet, and when he refers to the evenings steeped in "honied indolence". Dismissing the three figures, he longs for a time when nothing would annoy him and when he would neither be aware of the change of seasons nor have to listen to "the voice of busy common sense".

Sidney Colvin observes : "The *Ode On Indolence* stands midway, not necessarily in date of composition, but in scope and feeling, between the two Greek and the two personal odes.\* In it Keats again calls up the image of a marble urn, but not for its own sake, only to illustrate the guise in which he feigns the allegoric presences of Love, Ambition, and Poetry to have appeared to him in a day-dream. This ode, less highly wrought and more unequal than the rest, contains the imaginative record of a passing mood when the wonted intensity of his emotional life was suspended under the spell of an agreeable physical languor."

"This poem was not included among the Odes published in 1820, and it has been suggested that the reason was that it contains many phrases reminiscent of the other poems. Beautiful as it is in places, it falls short of their level of workmanship : it is noble verse, but not Keats at his noblest." Some of the beautiful lines are those in which the poet describes the month of May (Lines 45—48), and the lines in which the poet's mood of indolence is depicted (Lines 15—20). However, it may be pointed out that there is no profundity of thought in this poem and that it is merely as an expression of a mood, all too common among human beings, that the poem has some value. We do not have any flights of fancy in the poem nor do we have any exquisite phrases which distinguish the best odes of Keats. We do have a number of compound epithets for which Keats had an original genius : "summer-indolence" ; "honied indolence" ; "new-leaved vine" ; "cool-bedded" ; "masque-like". We also have certain apt expressions such as "muffled in so hush a mask", "ever watchful with fatigued eyes", "maiden most unmeek", "shelter'd from annoy", "voice of busy common sense", "embroider'd with dim dreams", "a lawn besprinkled o'er with flowers".

### ODE ON INDOLENCE

"They toil not, neither do they spin."

#### I

One morn before me were three figures seen,  
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced,  
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,  
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced :

\*The two Greek odes are the *Ode On A Grecian Urn* and *Ode On Psyche*.  
The two personal odes are the *Ode To A Nightingale* and the *Ode On Melancholy*.

They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn,  
When shifted round, to see the other side ;  
They came again ; as, when the urn once more,  
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return ;  
And they were strange to me, as may betide  
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

5

10

## II

How is it, Shadows ! that I knew ye not ?  
How came ye muffled in so hush a mask ?  
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot  
To steal away, and leave without a task  
My idle days ? Ripe was the drowsy hour ;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
Benumb'd my eyes ; my pulse grew less and less ;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower :  
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness ?

15

20

## III

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd  
Each one the face a moment whiles to me ;  
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd  
And ached for wings, because I knew the three ;  
The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name ;  
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,  
And ever watchful with fatigued eye ;  
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame  
Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,—  
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

25

30

## IV

They faded, and, forsooth ! I wanted wings :  
O folly ! What is love ? and where is it ?  
And for that poor Ambition ! it springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit ;  
For Poesy !—no,—she has not a joy,—  
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,  
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence ;  
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,  
That I may never know how change the moons,  
Or hear the voice of busy common sense !

35

40

## V

And once more came they by ;—alas ! wherefore ?  
My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams ;  
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er  
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams.

The morn was clouded, but no shower fell, 45  
 Tho' in her lids hung the sweet tears of May ;  
 The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,  
 Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay ;  
 O Shadows ! 'twas a time to bid farewell !  
 Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine. 50

## VI

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu ! Ye cannot raise  
 My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass ;  
 For I would not be dieted with praise,  
 A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce !  
 Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more 55  
 In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn ;  
 Farewell ! I yet have visions for the night,  
 And for the day faint visions there is store ;  
 Vanish, ye Phantoms ! from my idle spright,  
 Into the clouds, and never more return ! 60

## 4. Explanations

**Explanation :** *And they were strange to me.....Phidian lore* (Lines 9-10)—Phidias was a celebrated Athenian sculptor of the 5th century B.C. Keats says that the figures that passed before his eyes were strange to him. It seemed to the poet that these figures passed before him like figures on a marble urn when shifted round. The poet did not know who those figures were. He did not recognise the figures just as even a skilled artist cannot sometimes recognise the figures depicted on an urn.

(*As may betide with vases*—as may happen in the case of the figures depicted on vases or urns. *One deep in Phidian lore*—one having considerable experience of works of sculpture like those created by the ancient artist, Phidias.)

**Explanation :** *How is it.....so hush a mask ?* (Lines 11-12) —Addressing the figures that passed before him, the poet says that he did not recognise them. He asked the figures why they came in so quiet a disguise. It was natural for the poet to want to know the identity of the figures, but it seemed to him that they had appeared before him in a disguise so as to make it difficult for him to recognise them.

**Explanation :** *Ripe was the drowsy hour.....nothingness ?* (Lines 15-20)—These lines contain a very skilful description of the poet's drowsy or indolent mood. As it was noon-time, the hour itself was a drowsy one. The poet's eyes were overwhelmed by a happy feeling of indolence which is characteristic of summer. The beating of the poet's pulse became weaker and weaker on account of the feeling of laziness. In that mood, he neither experienced a sensation of pain nor a sensation of pleasure. Pain had no sting, and pleasure had no charm about it. In other words, the poet in his mood of

languor was insensitive to both pleasure and pain. The poet asked the figures before him why they had come to disturb him in that mood. He wanted the figures to melt away and to leave his mind utterly blank. He did not want his mood of indolence to be interrupted by those figures trying to thrust themselves on his attention.

**Explanation :** *The last, whom I love more.....my demon Poesy* (Lines 28-30)—The third figure that passed before him was that of Poesy. In other words, the third figure was a personification of the poetic art. The poetic art had taken the shape of a proud maiden. Expressing his devotion to the poetic art, Keats says that he loved it all the more for the condemnation that it received from people. The more the people found fault with Poesy, the more Keats loved her. Poesy was his demon, or his guardian spirit.

(*Most unmeek—most proud. Demon—guardian spirit.*)

**Explanation :** *They faded, and.....busy common sense* (Lines 31-40)—The figures faded, and Keats felt the want of wings with which he could follow them. But the very next moment he realised that his desire to follow them was foolish. A pursuit of those three figures would not be worth while at all. Love is something that does not really exist. As for ambition, it is a result of a short-lived agitation or excitement that a man experiences in his little heart. Poesy may have its pleasures, but none of its pleasures can put him in that mood of bliss which he experiences at the time of drowsy noons and in the evenings when he is overcome by the feeling of sweet languor. The poet then goes on to express his desire to spend a long period of his life in this mood of indolence when he would be safe from all kinds of irritation and annoyance, when he would not have to listen to practical people talking of their routine activities and their profit-making.

In this stanza the poet dismisses all the three figures, Love, Ambition and Poesy which represent some of the chief interests of life. He is willing to sacrifice all the three in order to continue in his mood of indolence.

**Explanation :** *My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams* (Line 43)—The poet does not feel interested in any of those three figures because of his mood of honied indolence. In that mood he has been seeing dim dreams and visions which have lent an additional charm to his drowsiness.

**Explanation :** *The morn was clouded.....no tears of mine* (Lines 45-50)—It was a cloudy morning, although there was no rain. The air smelt of moisture which indicated the possibility of rainfall. Against the open window was pressed a vine with its new leaves. Through that open window could be felt the warmth of May. The song of a thrush also came through the window to add to the poet's happiness. Addressing the three figures which had appeared before him, the poet asks them to leave him. He does not want

them to rouse him to activity and to work which was sure to bring suffering and tears.

**Explanation :** *So, ye three Ghosts.....sentimental farce—(Lines 51-54)*—The poet dismisses the three ghostly figures and tells them that they cannot pull him out of his mood of indolence. He feels like a man with his head buried in the cool and flowery grass. The three figures, he says, have no power to raise his head and to distract him from his mood of languor. He has no desire to pursue ambition or to write poetry because he does not want to be petted by the public and to be fed with flattery by people. He regards the flattery of the public as a mere sentimental farce which is of no value and no significance to him. He would not like to reduce himself to the position of a lamb which is fondled and caressed by people.

**Explanation :** *Vanish, ye Phantoms.....never more return.* (Lines 59-60)—The poem ends with a final dismissal of the three ghostly figures. The poet would like the three figures to disappear and to melt in the clouds. He wants them never again to come and disturb him in his idle mood.

(*Phantoms*—ghostly figures. *Spright*—spirit).

#### IV. ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

##### 1. Introduction

The ancient Greeks used to cremate a dead human being and to deposit the ashes in an urn which was then buried. An urn was a kind of vase generally made of marble or of brass. Often, different kinds of scenes and situations were carved on the outer surface of an urn. An urn, therefore, apart from serving as a repository of the ashes of the dead, was also a work of art. The present poem was partly inspired by a marble Grecian urn which was in the possession of Lord Holland and on which was carved a scene of pastoral sacrifice such as the one that is described in the fourth stanza. A Bacchanalian\* procession was also sometimes carved on a Grecian urn. It seems almost certain that Keats was not merely thinking of the particular urn in the possession of Lord Holland, but also of Greek sculpture in general as represented by the famous Elgin marbles† which he had seen in the British museum. Keats had a natural affinity with the Greek mind and this poem shows his love of Greek art.

##### 2. Critical Summary

**Various scenes depicted on the urn :** Keats addresses the Grecian urn as an “unravished bride of quietness and a foster-child of silence and slow time.” Thus Keats conveys to us the idea of the silent repose and the great age of this piece of Greek sculpture. He

\**Bacchanalian*—riotous ; drunken ; wine-loving ; pertaining to revellers.

†*Elgin marbles*—a collection of ancient Greek sculptures sold ~~to~~ <sup>by</sup> the Earl of Elgin to the British government in 1816.

also calls the Grecian urn a "Sylvan historian" because of the rural and forest scenes carved on its surface. In a series of questions, which are also vivid pictures, he gives us an idea of what those carvings represent. He refers to the human beings and the gods depicted on the urn in the beautiful valleys of Tempe and Arcadia. He refers to the men in a passionate mood chasing maidens who are struggling to escape from their clutches. Then there are the flute-players playing wild and ecstatic music.

**Art is superior to life :** The poet goes on to say that music which is imagined is much sweeter than music which is actually heard. The music of the flute-players depicted on the Grecian urn cannot be actually heard by us : we must imagine what tunes they are playing. These unheard, but imaginable, melodies are sweeter than the songs that we actually hear. Besides, the lover who is trying to kiss his beloved on the urn will always be seen in the same mood of pleasurable anticipation. In real life, love and beauty decline and fade ; but the love and beauty depicted on the urn will remain ever fresh.

In real life, spring is short, and the trees must shed their leaves. Similarly, in real life a musician will at least feel tired of playing his music and will stop. The enjoyment of the pleasures of love in real life is followed by disgust and satiety. But the trees depicted on the urn will never shed their leaves ; the melodist will for ever play his tunes, and the heart of the lover will always throb with passion while the beauty of the beloved will never fade. In this way, the poet wishes to convey the idea that art is, in one sense, superior to real life.

**The town emptied of its folk :** Then follows a picture of a crowd of people going to some place of worship. A priest leads a heifer which has been decorated with garlands and which is to be offered as a sacrifice. The worshippers have come from some little town situated close to a river or on a sea-shore or at the foot of a hill on which stands a fortress. The town which has been emptied of its people, will always remain desolate, because the people shown on the urn will always be seen going away to the place of worship but never returning to the town.

**Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty :** The poet then addresses the urn as "Attic shape", "Fair attitude", and "Cold pastoral". These expressions convey the beauty and the poise of the urn and refer also to the rural scenes depicted on it. The feelings which the urn awakens in the poet are like the overwhelming feelings which arise when the poet thinks of eternity. The urn, says Keats, will always be a friend to man. The generations of men will come and pass, and will perhaps undergo sufferings and sorrows of which we have no notion at present. But the urn will have a valuable message for those generations, the message, namely, that Beauty and Truth are not separate things but two sides of one and the same thing. (Or, Beauty and Truth are not two things, not even twin things, but one and the same thing seen from different aspects.) The knowledge of this great

fact is of supreme importance and this fact represents the very essence of wisdom. Having this knowledge, mankind needs no other knowledge.

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**Inspired by Greek sculpture :** This poem was inspired by a collection of Greek sculpture which Keats saw in the British museum. Partly, perhaps, the inspiration for the poem was derived from a marble urn which belonged to Lord Holland. In giving us the imagery of the carvings on the urn, Keats was not thinking of a single urn but of Greek sculpture in general. Keats had a native sympathy for, and a natural affinity with, the Greek mind. This ode shows the full force of Hellenic influence acting on a temperament essentially romantic.

**Concrete and sensuous imagery :** A striking quality of Keats's entire poetry is fully revealed in this ode. Keats had a genius for drawing vivid and concrete pictures mostly with a sensuous appeal. The whole of this poem is a series of such pictures—passionate men and gods chasing reluctant maidens, the flute-players playing their ecstatic music, the fair youth trying to kiss his beloved, the happy branches of the trees, the worshippers going to a place of worship in order to offer a sacrifice with a mysterious priest to lead them, a little town which will always remain desolate—these are pictures which Keats vividly brings before our minds. The passion of men and gods, and the reluctance of maidens to be caught or seized is beautifully depicted in the following two lines :

- \*      What men or gods are these ? What maidens loth ?  
          What mad pursuit ? What struggle to escape ?

Here is the picture of a bold lover trying to get a kiss which will never materialise :

- \*      Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
          Though winning near the goal—

The ecstasy of the passion of youthful love is depicted in the following lines :

- More happy love ! more happy, happy love !  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd  
For ever panting and for ever young.

**The superiority of art over life :** An important idea in this ode is that art is superior to real life in certain respects. The trees depicted on the urn will always enjoy spring. The flute-players shown on the urn will never tire of playing tunes which are ever new. The passion of the lovers depicted on the urn will never decline, and the beauty of the beloved will never fade. Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter. The music of the flute-players depicted on the urn has a sweetness which music in real life can never possess.

"The second and third stanzas express with perfect poetic felicity and insight the vital differences between life, which pays for

its unique prerogative of reality by satiety and decay, and art, which in forfeiting reality gains in exchange permanence of beauty, and the power to charm by imagined experience even richer than the real."

(Sidney Colvin)

Sidney Colvin perceives a dissonance between the idea of the second and third stanzas and that of the fourth. The fourth stanza, this critic points out, speaks of the arrest of life as though it were an infliction in the sphere of reality, and not merely, like the examples of such arrest given in the preceding stanzas, a necessary condition in the sphere of art, having in that sphere its own compensations. But Sidney Colvin would like the reader to reconcile himself to this dissonance.

**Beauty and Truth :** The central thought of this ode is the unity of Truth and Beauty. Beauty and Truth, says Keats, are not two separate things. They are one and the same thing seen from two different aspects. What is beautiful must be true, and what is true must be beautiful. There can be no question of Beauty being separated from Truth. Every piece of art which is based on truth or reality must be beautiful; and every beautiful work of art must have a hard core of truth in it. Thus Keats seems to reject the school of gross realism in art on one side, and the school of ornament for ornament's sake on the other. Keats may have no right to frame a law for the artist, but the idea contained in the final stanza of the poem may justly be regarded as his main contribution to speculative thought.

**Mingling of intellectual and emotional elements :** This ode represents the maturity and the height of Keats's poetic power. His poetry is essentially imaginative and emotional, but his greatest poems possess also an intellectual appeal. This ode, for instance, represents an exquisite fusion of the imaginative, emotional, and intellectual elements. The moral of the urn, namely, that Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty, has an intellectual basis. But, apart from this, the poem is charged with emotion and shows rich imagination. The first three stanzas, especially, have a passionate quality about them. Lines already quoted above in a different context amply show that.

**Technical merits :** This ode is written in a regular stanza of ten lines, consisting of a quatrain and a sestet. Thus it does not follow the pattern of the long and unequal stanzas of the *Ode To Psyche*.

Like most of his other poems, this ode shows Keats's genius for coining original, striking, and appropriate phrases. "Sylvan historian", "leaf-fringed legend", "a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd", "Gold pastoral", and "Fair attitude" are some of the examples; while the statement "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty", is a neat and compact expression of a profound fact, an expression which is one of the most often quoted from English poetry.

### H.W. Garrod on the Theme of this Ode

H.W. Garrod writes : "The theme of what has gone before (in the first four stanzas) is the arrest of beauty, the fixity given by art to forms which in life are fluid and impermanent, and the appeal of art from the senses to the spirit. The theme of the final stanza is the relation of beauty to truth or to thought. Nothing has prepared the transition to this.....The figures of the urn become for Keats, suddenly, a "Cold Pastoral"—cold, the character of everything that is enduring.....The second half of the stanza—of which the first, marring seriously, as I think, the effect of all that has preceded, has called in question the appeal of art.....Down to the end of the fourth stanza there is a very perfect development of the governing idea—the supremacy of ideal art over Nature, because of its unchanging expression of perfection. Perhaps the fourth stanza is more beautiful than any of the others—and more true. The trouble is that it is a little too true. Truth to his own main theme has taken Keats rather farther than he meant to go.....This pure cold art makes, in fact, a less appeal to Keats than the ode as a whole pretends ; and when, in the lines that follow these lines, he indulges the jarring apostrophe 'Cold Pastoral', he has said more than he meant or wished to mean."

(Among other critics who have found fault with the last stanza are T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate.)

According to another critic (Robin Mayhead), the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* seems to disparage sexual love, even though it seeks to establish a balance between art and life. The poet seems to imply that if only love could stop constantly at the stage of mere desire, all would be well. Although the poem admits the claims of a warm-blooded life, it seems to convey the feeling that sexual love is something of a disaster. (The *Ode To Psyche* presents an altogether different view.)

In the Grecian urn, Keats find a more satisfying symbol of permanence than the song of the nightingale. But the deficiencies that the poem implies in the value of art weaken its power as a symbol, because one would certainly prefer the warm impermanence of human life to the cold permanence of the urn.

### Charles Patterson on the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

According to Charles Patterson, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* gives as much importance to passion as to the idea of permanence. This ode should not be regarded as a lyric of escape and should not be taken to represent Keats as a young man unwilling to face life as it is. The duality of the theme of this ode is indicated in the very opening stanza where we find a clue to Keats's real attitude toward the permanence of the urn and the supremacy of art. In this opening stanza Keats gives us a contrast between something unchanging (the urn) because it is dead and something transient because it is alive. This equipoise is continued in the second stanza, but the poet continues to toy with his dual matter, without asserting or implying

that lasting permanence is superior to transient passion. Nor does he indicate any preference in the third stanza, though the emphasis here, as in the second stanza, is upon the warmth and the turbulence of life. We have not been made to feel that Keats has any distinct preference for an unrealised but permanent love over an actually experienced and vital passion. In the fourth stanza we are carried into a world (the little town) that is permanent, but permanently empty, just as the figures on the urn are permanent but permanently lifeless. In the final stanza the poet ends his dual game. Here he emphatically addresses this thing of beauty as just what it is, a Grecian urn. This work of art, he says, has teased us out of thought, that is out of the world of actual into an ideal world in which we can momentarily and imaginatively enjoy the life that is free from the particular imperfections of our lot here. But this ideal world is not free of all imperfection ; it has very grave deficiencies, for it is lifeless, motionless, cold, unreal. The brief journey into fairyland is over, and Keats unmistakably means it to be over.

Keeping in mind the duality of his theme in the poem, it is clear that Keats deals with two kinds of experience : (1) human life in actuality, and (2) the appreciation of an imaginary representation of several human activities (love, music, community life, and religious ritual). The two kinds of experience are related. Art alone can never satisfy us completely (because the urn is a *cold pastoral*) ; it is only an imitation of reality. But this work of art can tell us something important about the real or actual experience, the love passion that is so fleeting and transient. That is, the essence of physical love is participation in the life-force and the continuing life-process ; only the individual instance is transient and short-lived. "Beauty is Truth", then, means that beauty is total reality properly understood ; that is, beauty is the true significance of things in our world, and in the ideal one.

The line "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" has troubled almost all critics who have dealt with this ode. T. S. Eliot looks upon this line as a serious flaw in a beautiful poem. Middleton Murry calls this line a troubling assertion which is an intrusion upon the poem, which does not grow out of the poem, and which is not dramatically accommodated to it. Such is essentially Garrod's objection also.

As Cleanth Brooks observes : "It is possible to emphasise the first part ("Beauty is Truth") and reach the conclusion that Keats is a pure aesthete, upholding art for art's sake. But it is also possible to emphasise the second part ("Truth is Beauty"), and argue with the Marxist critics that Keats upholds art as a medium of propaganda.

#### \* Cleanth Brooks on the Ode on a Grecian Urn

This critic makes a rapid survey of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* to show that the last lines of the poem (which seem to strike a discordant note in the eyes of some other critics) have dramatically been prepared for. In the first stanza, Keats emphasises the silence of

the urn—a “bride of quietness”, and a “foster-child of Silence”. But the urn is a historian too, a rural historian. This historian supplies no names and dates, and it gives the actions of men or gods, of god-like men or of superhuman gods. The action is intense even though the urn is cold marble. The scene is one of violent love-making, but the urn itself is like an “unravished bride” or like a childe of Silence. The paradox is to be noted.

The second stanza begins rather with a bold paradox which runs through the stanza : action goes on though the actors are motionless ; the song will not cease ; the maiden, always to be kissed but never actually kissed will remain changelessly beautiful. The poet is obviously emphasising the ever-fresh charm of the scene which can defy time and is deathless. The beauty portrayed is deathless because it is lifeless.

The third stanza repeats some of the earlier ideas. The trees cannot shed their leaves ; the untiring melodist and the ever-passionate lover reappear. There is a tendency to linger over the scene sentimentally. Whatever development there is in the stanza depends on the increased stress on the paradoxical element. The musician plays sweeter music because he is unheard, but it is implied that he does not tire of the song for the same reason that the lover does not tire of his love : neither song nor love here can find fulfilment. The songs are “for ever new” because they cannot be completed. The paradox is carried further in the case of the lover whose love is for ever warm because it is still to be enjoyed. The love depicted on the urn remains warm and young because it is not human flesh at all but cold, ancient marble.

The fourth stanza emphasises, not individual aspiration and desire, but communal life. It constitutes another chapter in the history that the “Sylvan historian” has to tell. The lines in which the poet speculates on the strange emptiness of the little town are among the most moving in this poem. “If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the heard melodies, of the figured lover to have a more warm and panting love than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities.”

In the fifth stanza we move out of the enchanted world depicted on the urn to consider the urn itself as an object, an “Attic shape” and a “Cold Pastoral”. The urn itself is a “silent form”; and it speaks, not by means of statement, but by teasing us out of thought. It is as enigmatic and bewildering as eternity is. The marble men and maidens of the urn will not grow old as real men and women will, and the “Sylvan historian” will recite its history to other generations. What will it say to them ? The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true. The “Sylvan historian”

presents us with beautiful histories, but they are true histories, and it is a good historian. Moreover, the truth which the "Sylvan historian" gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and it is the only kind that we need to have. The "Sylvan historian" so orders the selected facts that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth.

### ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

#### I

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness !  
 Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme :  
 What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady ?  
 What men or gods are these ? What maidens loth ?  
 What mad pursuit ? What struggle to escape ?  
 What pipes and timbrels ? What wild ecstasy ?

10

#### II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
 Are sweeter ; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on ;  
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone :  
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare ;  
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve ;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair !

20

#### III

Ah, happy, happy boughs ! that cannot shed  
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu ;  
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
 For ever piping songs for ever new ;  
 More happy love ! more happy, happy love !  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
 For ever panting and for ever young ;  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

30

#### IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice ?  
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest ?

ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn ?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be ; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

40

V

O Attic shape ! Fair attitude ! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed ;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity : Cold Pastoral !  
When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty',—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

4. Explanations

*Lines 1—10*

**Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness :** Keats here employs a metaphor to describe the silent repose and great age of the Grecian urn. An unravished bride is one who remains inviolate, that is, a bride whose marriage has not really consummated, and who remains untouched and pure. The metaphor is thus intended to convey the quietness and the undiminished glory of the Grecian urn over the centuries. The urn is an ancient piece of sculpture which has been lying undisturbed beneath the earth for ages and ages."

**Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time :** The urn has been adopted and nurtured by silence and the slow-passing time. Here again a metaphor has been employed to convey the idea of silent repose and great age. "Silence" and "Time" have here been personified.

**Note :** The mental and emotional attitude of the poet is exquisitely reflected in the clear-cut, yet suggestive, phraseology of the first two lines.

*Sylvan*—rural ; belonging to the countryside. *Sylvan historian*—The urn is called a Sylvan historian because of the forest scenes carved on it. The urn can tell a tale in the form of the pictures carved on it. It can tell a tale more powerfully than our rhyme ; that is, the urn is a powerful medium of communicating to us a flowery tale more sweetly than our poetry can. *A flowery tale*—a story about flowers and other beautiful objects of Nature.

*Leaf-fringed*—bordered with leaves. *Legend*—story. *Haunts about thy shape*—dwells on your surface. *Tempe*—the name of a

beautiful valley on the eastern coast of Greece. *Dales*—valleys. *Arcady*—Arcadia, a country famous for its pastoral beauty, also known as the Switzerland of Greece.

*What men or gods are these?.....What wild ecstasy?*—These three lines are a picture of turbulent passion, and convey the pulsating life depicted on the urn. Thus the urn appeals to the poet not merely because of its permanence or long age, but also because of the life that it suggests, and the life that it suggests is a life of passion and ecstatic music. It is a lovely picture indeed, the picture of men or gods chasing, in a state of hot passion, the reluctant maidens who are trying to escape from their clutches. This is followed by the picture of the musicians producing joyous strains of music.

**Note :** The use of the word “shape” in line 5 of the first stanza is, as pointed out by Charles Patterson, highly significant. This word not only draws attention to the outlines of the urn, but it also suggests the lines and curves of the feminine body, a suggestion already conveyed in the initial description of the urn as an “unravished bride”. “The form of the urn is subtly appropriate to embrace and frame the virile picture of life presented on its surface, for human life unfolds itself and continues through the body of woman. When one sums up *unravish'd bride, child, haunts about thy shape, men, maidens loth, mad pursuit, struggle to escape, and wild ecstasy,* he amasses a formidable array of the imagery of physical passion—all presented with relish and sympathy.”

#### Lines 11—20

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter*—This is one of the most memorable statements from Keats. The music that we actually hear is undoubtedly sweet, but the music that we imagine is much sweeter. (Imaginary pleasures, as Keats points out in his *Fancy*, are more enjoyable than the pleasures of reality.) Therefore Keats asks the pipes depicted on the surface of the urn to continue their music.

*Not to the sensual ear.....of no tone* (Lines 13-14)—The sweet music of the pipes which Keats sees on the urn is to be heard not by our sensual or bodily ears, but by our spirit or imagination. The music of the pipes is more dear to us than any actual music would be. We do not know what tunes are being played by these pipes, and yet we can admire and enjoy this music more than any actual music.

**Explanation :** *Fair youth, beneath the trees.....and she be fair!* (Lines 15-20)—On the urn, Keats sees a handsome young man singing a song beneath the trees in a forest. The song of this handsome young man can never come to an end. Nor will the leaves of these trees ever fall. Whenever we look at the urn, we shall see the young man singing his song, and we shall see the trees covered with their leaves. In actual life, a song must come to an end, and the leaves of the trees must ultimately decay and fall to the ground.

But, in the case of the urn, the song will never end and the leaves will never fall.

Another carving on the urn shows a lover bending forward to kiss a girl. The lover is not shown as actually kissing her, though he is trying to do so. The kiss has not materialised. Keats asks this lover not to feel sad at his inability to kiss the girl. The lover should find enough consolation in the fact that this girl will never grow old and that his love for her will never diminish or decline. He cannot enjoy the pleasure of the kiss, but he will always be seen in a state of anticipation. In actual life a young girl grows old with the passing of years and loses her beauty. Similarly, in actual life the passion of a lover cools down soon after it is satisfied. But so far as the carving on the urn is concerned, the passion of the lover will always remain and the beauty of the beloved will never fade. Beauty and love in real life have a short duration. But beauty and love as depicted on the urn, which is a work of art, are everlasting. Thus, in these lines, Keats has contrasted the permanence of art with the transitoriness of actual life. He asserts the supremacy of art over life.

[Note : Charles Patterson does not, however, accept this interpretation. According to him, Keats does not here assert the supremacy of art over life, but simply balances one against the other. In other words, Keats does not show any preference for art over real life. On the contrary, he seems to be attracted as much by the passion that one experiences in real life (even though that passion soon cools down) as by the permanence of the urn (which is a symbol of art). The comfort that Keats offers to the lover on the urn is at best spurious comfort : "For ever wilt thou love and she be fair !'" Keats seems to be playing with the dualism of the transitoriness of real life and the permanence of art. Commenting on this second stanza of the poem, Patterson observes : "Thus Keats continues to toy with his dual matter, but he neither asserts nor implies that lasting permanence is superior to transient passion."]

#### *Lines 21—30*

**Explanation :** *Ah, happy, happy boughs.....for ever new* (Lines 21-24)—The trees depicted on the urn are laden with leaves. It is the time of spring. The leaves on the trees look fresh, and its branches appear to be glad. These trees will enjoy an everlasting spring, and they will never lose their leaves. This is in contrast to the trees which, in real life, must shed their leaves when spring comes to an end. Then, there is, on the urn, a musician playing his music. He will continue to play on his pipe for ever, without feeling tired and without losing the happy mood in which he is playing the tunes that are ever fresh. In real life, a musician will at last tire of playing music and his tunes will come to an end. But the musician on the urn will play music for ever in a mood of perpetual joy. Thus, the poet has contrasted the shortness of everything in real life with the permanence of everything depicted in art.

**Explanation :** *More happy love.....and a parching tongue* (Lines 25-20)—The ever-happy and ever-passionate nature of love as depicted on the urn is here contrasted with the transitoriness of love in real life and with the disgust that the pleasures of love in real life ultimately produce. The lovers depicted on the urn will always remain young, will always feel passionate towards each other, will always be breathless with the excitement of love, will always feel happy in the expectation of enjoying the pleasures of love which they will never actually enjoy. In real life, human beings enjoy the pleasures of love fully and to the maximum, but the pleasures of love when enjoyed in excess give rise to a feeling of intense disillusionment. The enjoyment of the pleasures of love in real life leaves a man in a most feverish condition and with a parched mouth, as it were. The enjoyment of the pleasures of love in real life produces a feeling of satiety and emptiness ; but the joy of love as depicted on the urn can never lose its freshness. Even the intensity of the passion of love as depicted on the urn exceeds the intensity of that passion in real life. Here, again, the poet tries to establish the superiority of art as represented by the urn over the reality of life.

[**Note :** In the case of this third stanza also, Patterson refuses to believe that Keats is asserting the superiority of the permanence of art over the transitoriness of life. To Patterson it appears that this stanza expresses Keats's wish that the passion, the piping, and the panting could be more enduring in actuality, not merely in representation. The emphasis is still upon the warmth, the turbulence, of life, especially at the end of the stanza, where he vigorously calls for more human passion. There is no evidence that Keats would rather be the lover on the urn than be a lover in the world and actually enjoy the pleasures of love. The stanza does not say that Keats would rather see his love depicted permanently in art than experience the fulfilment of that love. Anyone who doubts this should re-read the love letters and the poems to Fanny Brawnc.]

#### *Lines 31—40*

**Explanation :** *Who are these.....with garlands drest ?* (Lines 31-34)—Another carving on the urn shows a procession going towards a place of worship in order to offer a sacrifice. The procession is headed by a priest who leads a young calf which is to be slaughtered for the sacrifice. The half-open mouth of the calf makes it appear as if the animal were uttering low cries with its head up-faised. The smooth sides of the body of the animal are decorated with garlands of flowers. The priest is called "mysterious" because nothing is known of his identity or religion.

(These lines, like the lines preceding, contain vivid pictures.)

**Note :** Such sacrifices as the one described in these lines were a common feature of Greek religious ceremonial.

**Explanation :** *What little town by river.....can e'er return* (Lines 35-40)—These lines contain the picture of a town the people

of which have gone away to an altar in order to offer a sacrifice. The poet imagines that this town is situated close to a river, or on a sea-shore, or at the foot of a hill on the top of which there stands a fortress. The town is empty because it is a holy morning and the people have left to offer a sacrifice at some distant altar. The carving on the urn shows the people going to the altar, but not returning to the town. Whenever we look at this carving on the urn, we shall see the people going away from the town but never returning. This means that the streets of this town will always remain silent and empty. Not a single individual will ever be seen returning to the town to explain why the town is empty and lifeless.

Here, again, a contrast is established between art and real life.

*Lines 41—50*

*Attic*—Athenian ; pertaining to Athens ; belonging to Greece. *O Attic shape*—As the urn belongs to Greece, the poet addresses it as “Attic shape”, meaning a piece of Greek art. *Fair attitude*—The urn is a beautiful work of art, with several scenes carved on it. The poet calls the urn “Fair attitude” to convey the beauty and poise of this work of art.

**Note :** In the words “shape” and “Fair attitude”, Charles Patterson again sees suggestions of the lovely curves of the feminine body. These expressions, according to him, call forth very delicately the lines of the feminine form in all its vital richness.

*Brede*—embroidery. *Marble men and maidens*—men and girls carved on the surface of the marble urn. *Overwrought*—worked all over ; with carvings all over its surface. *Trodden weed*--weeds which have been trampled upon.

**Explanation :** *O Attic shape.....the trodden weed* (Lines 41-43)—The urn is a beautiful specimen of Greek art, with several scenes and situations carved on its surface. The marble urn has been decorated with carvings of men and maidens. There are some rural scenes on the urn, showing weeds which have been trampled upon.

*Silent form*—silent shape of the urn.

*Dost tease us out of thought as doth eternity*—coax us to cease thinking just as the very mention of eternity bewilders us so much that we stop thinking. The shape of the silent urn and the images carved on it compel us to give up vain speculation in the same way as the concept of eternity compels us to give up vain speculations. The idea is that when we gaze at the urn, we get into a mood in which all speculation seems futile and in which all thinking will have to be suspended. As a critic (Robin Mayhead) points out, Keats, by comparing the urn to eternity, reinforces its value as a symbol of permanence and also tells us that it has the same capacity to divert us from rational thinking as bewilderment at the idea of eternity. The word “tease” implies that the urn tantalises the beholder. “It tantalises him by suggesting an ideal state of things in which one might:

"combine the permanence of art with what is purely pleasant in human life."

[However, Charles Patterson gives a different interpretation of this line. According to him, the urn teases us "out of the world of the actual and into an ideal world in which we can momentarily identify ourselves imaginatively with life that is free of the particular imperfections of our lot here."]

*Cold Pastoral*—cold, because the urn is made of marble ; cold, also because the figures carved on the urn are not alive ; pastoral, because rural scenes are depicted on the urn.

The phrase "cold Pastoral" clearly shows that Keats, while feeling very enthusiastic about the permanence of the love, the passion, the music, etc. depicted on the urn, is keenly aware also of the deficiency in the scenes carved on it. The deficiency is that there is no real life in these figures and scenes. Speaking about the phrase "cold Pastoral", Charles Patterson aptly observes : "The glowing carved figures, which have been vivified by the poet's imagination, recede and fade ; they re-assume their immobile, lifeless status on the urn. The words 'cold Pastoral' fall upon the apprehension like the tolling of a bell, placing the cold art at the opposite pole from the warm life." In other words, the poem does not seek to establish the superiority of art over life, but to bring before our minds the contrast between life and art, with the advantages and disadvantages of both. Art has beauty and permanence ; life is transitory but it has reality, besides, of course, beauty. We may add that art is an aid to life, not a substitute for it. Art can enrich and intensify actual contact with life, but can never take its place.

*When old age shall this generation.....to whom thou say'st* (Lines 46-48)—Although one generation of suffering human beings will be replaced by another generation, and so on over the years, the urn will continue to exist as it is. The urn will continue as an unchanging thing of beauty in the midst of the changing sorrows of rising and passing generations.

*Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty*—Whatever is beautiful must also be true ; and whatever is true must also be beautiful. Thus beauty and truth are inseparable. Beauty and truth are two sides of the one and the same thing. Beauty thus has a moral quality ; and all true morality has a beautiful character.

Another interpretation of this line is that beauty lies in the real world of men, not merely in art or in the fairyland of fancy. According to this interpretation, "truth" stands for the real and actual world as distinguished from the world of imagination.

According to still another interpretation, truth here does not mean truth to actual life ; it means truth to life as one may imagine it. According to this interpretation, the word "truth" has obviously a very wide meaning ; it includes the facts of life as actually lived as also life as one may imagine it.

*That is all ye know.....need to know*—Man has a limited mind. But with all the limitations of his mind, man can understand that beauty is truth, truth beauty. This knowledge is more than enough for all the purposes of human life.

"The meaningfulness and range of the poem, along with its controlled execution and powerfully suggested imagery, entitle it to a high place among Keats's great odes. It lacks the even finish and extreme perfection of *To Autumn* but is much superior in these qualities to the *Ode To A Nightingale* despite the magic passages in the latter and the similarities of over-all structure. In fact, the *Ode On A Grecian Urn* may deserve to rank first in the group if viewed in something approaching its true complexity and human wisdom."

—(Charles Patterson).

#### Robin Mayhead on the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

This critic points out that the use of the expressions "shape", "attitude", "silent form", "Cold Pastoral", etc. in the final stanza of the poem makes us think that the urn, despite its beauty, is not only non-human but almost inhuman. Yet Keats goes on to call the urn "a friend to man". Thus the concluding stanza seems to have a dual significance : first, the urn is a friend to man ; and, second, the urn is coldly remote from man. Keats wishes us not to reconcile these opposite views about the urn but to weigh one view against the other, to balance the two sets of feelings towards the urn, so that ultimately they may be seen as completing our assessment of the urn. Keats does not wish to turn his back upon what is human, however transitory and unsatisfactory it may be. After all, the poet speaks even about the figures on the urn in terms of warmth and passion ; he speaks of them as though they were alive. But at the same time he envies the permanence of the love and passion of those figures. In other words, Keats wants to have it both ways—to combine permanence of art with the warmth of human life, provided that only the pleasant things in life are included. When the scene is empty of human figures at the end of the fourth stanza, he experiences a feeling of chill, and is as desolate as the streets of the little town. A work of art may be exquisitely beautiful and satisfying which life perhaps can never be. But life, in spite of its sorrows, has a warmth which inevitably creeps into the poet's portrayal of the marble figures. It is almost as though Keats were trying to breathe life into those marble figures.

As for the famous words "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty", truth here does not mean truth to the facts of life as actually lived ; it means truth to life as one may imagine it in terms of the day-dream of having it both ways. Keats does not mean that living should be a perpetual day-dream. He presents the ideal of permanent happiness as a mere beautiful impossibility, which the urn may help us to see sometimes as a possibility.

Keats has here written a poem of superbly organised effects,

which wonderfully balances the claims of both the work of art and actual human life.

Keats observed that "with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all considerations". He seems to mean that the sense of beauty should overcome all considerations of what is disagreeable or painful. Many readers object to the moral of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* because, they say, beauty is not all truth, and not all truth is beautiful. Nor will these readers agree to the extravagant assertion that in the statement "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" we are to find all "Ye know on earth and all ye need to know".

But the statement "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" was not for Keats a pseudo-statement. Beauty was not for Keats an inert thing, or a thing whose value lay in having no relevance to ordinary life : it was not a word by which he evaded issues, but a word by which he confronted them. What he is saying in his letter is that a great poet (for instance, Shakespeare) looks at human life, sees the terrible truth of its evil, but sees it so intensely that it becomes an element of the beauty which is created by his act of perception. Those who say that the statement "Truth is Beauty" is false ignore their experience of the tragic art. Keats's statement is an accurate description of the response to evil or ugliness which tragedy makes : the matter of tragedy is ugly or painful truth seen as beauty. To see life in this way, Keats believes, is to see life truly. Beauty is thus a middle term which connects and reconciles two kinds of truth—through the mediation of beauty, truth of fact becomes truth of affirmation, truth of life.....(Lionel Trilling in *The Poet As Hero : Keats In His Letters*).

## V. ODE TO A NIGHTINGATE

### 1. Introduction

In the early months of 1819, Keats was living with his friend Brown at Wentworth place, Hampstead. In April a nightingale built her nest in the garden. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in its song, and one morning, sitting in a chair on the grass-plot under a plum-tree, he composed a poem containing his poetic feelings about the song of the nightingale. This was his *Ode To A Nightingale* which was first printed in July, 1819. Subsequently it formed part of the volume which appeared in 1820 entitled *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve Of St. Agnes, And Other Poems*.

Four of Keats's odes, the *Ode To A Nightingale*, the *Ode On A Grecian Urn*, the *Ode On Melancholy*, and *To Autumn* should be studied together. They were all written in 1819 and the same train of thought runs through them all. One can even say that these four odes sum up Keats's philosophy.

"The first-written of the four, the *Ode To A Nightingale*, is the most passionately human and personal of them all". It was written

soon after the death of Keats's brother Tom, to whom he had been deeply attached and whom he nursed to the end. Keats was feeling keenly the tragedy of a world in which a young man grows pale, becomes a skeleton, and meets his end prematurely ("Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies"). The song of the nightingale aroused in him a longing to escape with it from this world of sorrows to the world of ideal beauty. The song of the nightingale somehow symbolised to him a world of ideal beauty. "He did not think of a nightingale as an individual bird, but of its song, which had been beautiful for centuries and would continue to be beautiful long after his generation had passed away ; and the thought of this undying loveliness he contrasted bitterly with our feverishly sad and short life. When, by the power of imagination he had left the world behind him and was absorbed in the vision of beauty roused by the bird's song, he longed for death rather than a return of disillusionment."

The poem contrasts the immortality of the nightingale (as symbolised by its song) with the mortality of human beings. It also contrasts the happiness and joy of the bird with the sufferings, sorrows and afflictions of the human world where youth, beauty and love are all short-lived.

## 2. Critical Summary

### *Stanza 1*

The poet's heart aches and his body is benumbed as he hears the song of a nightingale. He feels like one who has taken a benumbing poison or a dulling drug. This effect is produced on him by the happy song of the nightingale who is singing in a joyous, glorious voice among the green beech-trees and who is called by the poet a light-winged nymph of the trees.

It is to be noted that the poet lapses away into a kind of swoon on hearing the ecstatic song of the nightingale and he seeks oblivion. The following words in this stanza produce a cumulative effect of drugged languor : "aches", "drowsy numbness", "pains", "dull opiate", "Lethe-wards had sunk". The very movement of the verse here contributes to the total effect of languor that is produced.

It is an excess of happiness, occasioned by the bird's song, that produces the mood of languor in the poet. However, the narcotic effect is to some extent relieved by a feeling of renewed life that is produced by a reference to the "light-winged Dryad of the trees", "the melodious plot of beechen green," and "summer".

### *Stanza 2*

The poet craves for a drink of some marvellous wine brewed in the warm, gay and mirthful regions of France, or a large cup of red wine fetched from the fountain of the Muses. He wants this wine to enable him to leave this world of reality and to escape into the forest where he can join the nightingale.

The nightingale and its songs have given way, in this stanza, to other thoughts—thoughts of wine, the colourful lands in which its grapes are grown, and the gaiety which it brings. A general atmosphere of warmth predominates in this stanza. "Sun-burnt mirth" combines the idea of the sun's warmth with the warmth of joy in the merry-makers. This is a richly sensuous stanza with its references to gaiety and merry-making, the cool wine, the dancing, the blushful wine with its bubbles winking at the brim. The poet's desire for wine does not mean a desire for warmth and gaiety; it is a desire for escape from the world of realities.

### *Stanza 3*

The poet wishes to forget himself and escape from this world of perplexity and sorrow into the forest to be in the company of the nightingale. Life, he says, offers a depressing spectacle with its weariness, fever, and fret. This is a world in which people hear each other's groans, a world in which palsy may attack the old and consumption may attack the young, in which merely to think is to become sad, and in which both beauty and love are short-lived.

Here we have some of the most pessimistic lines in English poetry. Of course, the picture of life depicted here is one-sided, but it is nonetheless realistic and convincing. It cannot be doubted that the amount of suffering in this world is far greater than the amount of happiness. Apart from that, these lines echo the poet's personal grief caused by the premature death of his brother Tom. Although these lines are prompted chiefly by personal grief, yet their universal character has to be recognised.

The nightingale is believed by the poet to be happy because it is not human, because it has never known the weariness, the fever and fret of human existence. "And the poet knows too well that the happiness in mentally following the bird into its world among the leaves cannot last, for he is a human being after all, and what is human must pass away. His depression is thus implicit in the happiness itself."

### *Stanza 4*

Dismissing the idea of wine, the poet decides to fly into the forest on the wings of his poetic imagination. He rejects Bacchus and seeks the help of Poesy. The next moment he feels transported into the forest. The moon is shining, surrounded by the stars, but the forest is dark because very little light can penetrate the thickly-growing leaves of trees.

After having given expression to thoughts of human sorrow in the third stanza, the poet here makes a vigorous effort to get back into a happy mood. Gloomy thoughts about the human lot are now brushed aside, together with the possibility of wine. Seeking refuge in poetic fancy, he draws pleasure from the glory of Nature. However, the picture of Nature in the second half of the stanza has been criticised as being "affected" because of the reference to the

"Queen-Moon," and the idea of the stars as fairies. "Keats is being self-consciously poetical in the bad sense, as though he had gone back to the 'pretty' manner of *Endymion*. It is not accidental that he has used the rather affected word "Poesy" here. The lines are exceedingly charming, and when we have said that, we have made a point against them. This kind of charm is not what we have come to accept from the mature Keats."—(Robin Mayhead).

### *Stanza 5*

The poet cannot see what flowers grow at his feet in the forest and what blossoms are on the fruit trees. However, by the scents that fill the dark air, he can guess that the forest is full of white-hawthorns, sweet-briers, violets, and buds of musk-roses which will in due course attract multitudes of flies on summer evenings.

This is again a richly sensuous stanza. The poet makes a delighted response to the sensuous beauty of the world of Nature.

### *Stanza 6*

As he hears the nightingale's song in the darkness, he remembers how on many occasions in his life he has wished for death that would bring a release from the burden of existence. More than ever before, he now feels a desire to die, though he would like to die a painless death : "To cease upon the midnight with no pain." The nightingale will continue to pour forth its ecstatic melody even when he is dead and become completely deaf to it.

\* The mood of the poet has again changed. He started the poem in a mood of ecstasy which changed into a mood of extreme sorrow in the third stanza. In the fourth and fifth stanzas, he changed back into a joyous mood. Now he expresses a wish to die. In this stanza he is therefore in a most morbid mood. The desire for death is obviously an unhealthy one and, though the reader may have been sharing the preceding moods of the poet, he may not be able to share this desire for death.

### *Stanza 7*

The poet now contrasts the mortality of human beings with the immortality of the nightingale. The nightingale's song, he argues, has not changed for centuries. The voice of the nightingale which he now hears is perhaps the same as was heard in ancient times by emperor and clown, the same as was heard by the miserable Ruth as she stood in the alien corn. It is the same voice which has often cast a spell upon the enchanted windows of a castle situated on the shore of a dangerous ocean in "fairy lands forlorn".

There is something illogical about the poet's attributing immortality to the nightingale but, of course, he is referring to the continuity of the bird's song which has remained unchanged through the centuries. He certainly does not mean that the bird is literally

immortal. He only takes the nightingale's song as a symbol of permanence. Generations pass, yet the song of the nightingale continues from age to age. In the *Ode On Melancholy*, Keats accepts impermanence as inevitable, but here he dwells upon the idea of permanence.

The last two lines of the stanza have become famous for the sense of wonder and mystery which they arouse. It is said that in these two lines Keats has touched the high watermark of romanticism.

### *Stanza 8*

The word "forlorn" acts on the poet's mind like the ringing of an alarm bell and reminds him of his own forlorn condition. As the song of the nightingale becomes more distant, his imagination which had carried him into the forest also declines, and the poetic vision fades. He knows that he is moving back from the region of poetic fancy to the common world of reality. After all, "the fancy cannot cheat so well as she is famed to do."

In the concluding stanza, the poet introduces two new ideas. One is that even the song of the nightingale cannot be heard constantly and that it must fade away before long. Secondly, the poetic imagination itself has only brief flights and that, at the end of a poetic flight to beautiful regions, one must return to the painful realities of life. Thus the ode, which had opened on a note of ecstasy, ends on a note of frustration.

### **3. A note on the poet's mood in the *Ode To A Nightingale***

The poet's mood in the two opening stanzas is one of joy and ecstasy which almost numbs his senses. This mood is due to the rapturous song of the nightingale. This mood leads him to a desire for a beaker of wine by drinking which he can forget this world of sorrows and misfortunes and fade away into the forest where the nightingale is singing its joyous song.

The poet then expresses the sense of the tragedy of life and the sadness resulting therefrom. He refers to the weariness, the fever, and the fret of human life. This is a world where men sit and hear each other groan, where palsy shakes the few last hairs of aged people, where young people fall a prey to fatal diseases (like tuberculosis), where merely to think is to become sorrowful, and where beauty and love are short-lived. Thus the mood of ecstasy with which the poem had opened changes here into a mood of deep pessimism and despair.

The mood of deep pessimism and despair gives way to a mood of delight occasioned by his imaginative contact with the beauty and glory of Nature. He has flown into the forest on the wings of his imagination in spite of the retarding effect of the dullness of the brain. (The pure reason or intellect hinders the free play of the imagination!) The moon, the stars, the flowers growing at his feet relieve his sense of the tragedy of life.

Next, we find the poet "half in love with easeful death". He refers to his desire for death on earlier occasions but at this moment especially he thinks it "rich to die". This desire for death shows a morbidity in the poet. He strikes an unduly pessimistic note. Life has its sorrows and griefs ; beauty and love and youth are short-lived ; but Nature has its joys, its charm, its glory. The reason why the poet yields to a feeling of utter despair is that his personal circumstances are at the back of his mind when he is writing the poem. His brother Tom had died of tuberculosis ; he himself suffered from this dread disease ; and his love for Fanny Brawne had not been fulfilled.

The thought of his own death makes the poet contrast the mortality of human beings with the immortality of the nightingale. He feels that the song of nightingale which he is now hearing is the same as was heard in ancient times by emperor and clown, and by the tearful Ruth, the same that often in the past had unlocked magic casements in the solitary countries of the fairies or the legendary countries of romance. Having denied a feeling of envy of the nightingale's joy in the opening stanza, he now is undoubtedly in a mood of envying the immortality of the nightingale. A desire to die, expressed in the preceding stanza, here imperceptibly leads him, though implicitly, to envy the supposed immortality of the bird. In the final stanza, he is again overcome by a feeling of melancholy because, not only is the nightingale's song fading away, but also because his imaginative flight into the forest has ended and he finds himself face to face with the stern realities of life. He finds that the nightingale's song gives rise to an illusion, an illusion which fails, leaving the listener alone with his cares and griefs.

#### 4. Critical Appreciation

**A masterpiece :** The *Ode To A Nightingale* shows the ripeness and maturity of Keats's poetic faculty. This poem is truly a masterpiece, showing the splendour of Keats's imagination on its purely romantic side, and remarkable also for its note of reflection and meditation. The central idea here is the contrast of the joy and beauty and apparent permanence of the nightingale's song, with the sorrows of human life and the transitoriness of beauty and love in this world.

**Its melancholy and note of pessimism :** A passionate melancholy broods over the whole poem. The passage describing the sorrows and misfortunes of life is deeply pessimistic. The world is full of weariness, fever, and fret, and the groans of suffering humanity. Palsy afflicts the old and premature death overtakes the young. To think here is to be full of sorrow ; both beauty and love are short-lived.

Keats wrote this poem shortly after the death (from consumption) of his brother Tom to whom he was deeply attached. He was also perhaps thinking of the premature death of Elizabeth Taylor. He was therefore weighed down by a profound sense of the tragedy

of life ; and of that sense of tragedy, this poem is a poignant expression.

The note of pessimism is found also in the lines where the poet expresses a desire to die, "to cease upon the midnight with no pain". When we remember that Keats actually died a premature death, we realise the note of unconscious prophecy in these lines which for this reason become still more pathetic.

The passionately personal and human character of this poem is thus obvious. It reveals Keats's sense of the tragedy of human life in general and his sense of personal suffering in particular. The poem brings before our eyes a painful picture of the sorrows and griefs of human life, and at the same time it conveys to us the melancholy and sadness which had afflicted Keats for various reasons. The poem is the cry of a wounded soul.

**Its rich sensuousness and pictorial quality :** The poem is one of the finest examples of Keats's pictorial quality and his rich sensuousness. We have an abundance of rich, concrete, and sensuous imagery. The lines in which the poet expresses a passionate desire for some Provencal wine or the red wine from the fountain of the Muses have a rich appeal :

O for a draught of vintage, that hath been  
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
 Dance, and Provencal song, and sun-burnt mirth !

These lines bring before us a delightful picture of Provence with its fun and frolic, jollity, merry-making, drinking and dancing. Similarly, the beaker full of the sparkling, blushful Hippocrene is highly pleasing.

Then there is the magnificent picture of the moon shining in the sky and surrounded by stars, looking like a queen surrounded by her attendant fairies :

And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays.

The rich feast of flowers that awaits us in the next stanza is one of the outstanding beauties of the poem. Flowers, soft incense, the fruit trees, the white hawthorn, the eglantine, the fast-fading violets, the coming musk-rose full of sweet juice—all this is a delight for our senses.

Apart from these sensuous pictures, there is also the vivid and pathetic image of Ruth when, sick for home, she stood tearful amid the alien corn. This is a highly suggestive picture calling up many associations to the mind of one who is acquainted with the Bible.

**Its lyric intensity :** The poem is a beautiful example of lyrical poetry, poetry which is the impassioned expression of passionate feelings. The poem opens with a passionate feeling of joy akin to the numbing effect of some drug. This is followed by a passionate

desire for wine. Then comes a *passionate* melancholy born of the spectacle of sorrow in this world. Next is the *passionate* delight in flowers and blossoms, followed by a *passionate* desire for death. The lyrical intensity of this ode is, indeed, one of the reasons of its greatness as poetry.

**Style :** The poem is written in a superb style. It displays Keats's power as a master of poetic language at its highest. Keats here shows consummate skill in the choice of words and in making original and highly expressive phrases. Certain phrases, expressions and lines continue to haunt the mind of the reader long after he has read the poem. The phrase "the blushful Hippocrene" which refers to the fountain of the Muses and its red wine looking like the blushing cheeks of a pretty girl is indeed beautiful. Again, this wine has beaded bubbles "winking at the brim". The word "winking" here means sparkling, but how much more is suggested by this word ! The bubbles seem to be inviting a man to the wine as a girl's wink would invite him to her company. Another expressive phrase is "purple-stained mouth", that is, a mouth which has been stained red by wine. Memorable also are the following phrases and expressions—"verdurous blooms" (line 40) ; "embalmed darkness" (line 43) ; "Mid-May's eldest child—the coming musk-rose" (lines 48-49) ; "The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves" (line 50). The line "the weariness, the fever and the fret" admirably describes the sorrows and perplexities of life. "Leaden-eyed despair" effectively conveys the dullness in the eyes of a man who is in a state of despair. Still another memorable line is : "To thy high requiem become a sod."

**The romantic character of the poem :** The *Ode To A Nightingale* is a highly romantic poem. Its romanticism is due to (a) its rich sensuousness, (b) its note of intense desire and its deep melancholy, (c) its suggestiveness, (d) its sweet music, and its fresh and original phrases. Two lines in the poem represent the high water-mark of pure romanticism :

The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

The touch of the supernatural, the mystery, and above all the suggestiveness of these lines have made them a test by which purely romantic poetry can be judged and measured.

In form this poem is a "regular ode". There is a uniformity of the number of lines and of the rhyme-scheme in all the stanzas.

**Sir Sidney Colvin observes :** In the *Ode On Melancholy*, Keats expresses his experience of the habitual interchange and alternation of the emotions of joy and pain. The same crossing and intermingling of opposite currents of feeling finds expression, together with unequalled touches of the poet's feeling for Nature and romance, in the *Ode To A Nightingale*. It is not the particular nightingale he had

heard singing in the garden that he speaks about in the poem, but a type of the race imagined as singing in some far-off scene of woodland mystery and beauty. Thither he tries to follow her : first by aid of the spell of some southern wine—a spell which he makes us realise in lines suggestive of the southern richness and joy. Then follows a contrasted vision of all his own and mankind's sufferings which he will leave behind him. Nay, he needs not the aid of Bacchus. Poetic fancy alone shall carry him thither. For a moment he mistrusts its power, but the next moment finds himself where he longed to be, listening to the imagined song in the imagined woodland, and imagining in the darkness all the secrets of the season and the night. In this joy he remembers how often the thought of death has seemed welcome to him, and thinks it would be more welcome now than ever before. This nightingale would not cease her song—and here, by a breach of logic which is also a flaw in the poetry, he contrasts the shortness of human life, meaning the life of the individual, with the permanence of the nightingale's life, meaning the life of the race. This last thought leads him off into the ages, whence he brings back memorable touches of far-off Bible and legendary romance in the stanza closing with the words "in faery lands forlorn". Then, catching up his own last word "forlorn", with an abrupt change of mood and meaning, he returns to daily consciousness, and with the fading away of his forest-dream the poem closes.

According to Sidney Colvin, the *Ode To A Nightingale* is not strictly faultless, but its revealing imaginative insight, its conquering poetic charm, its touch that strikes so lightly but so deep, are preferable to faultlessness. With the *Ode On A Grecian Urn*, this poem is "among the veriest glories of our poetry".

**Allen Tate** calls the *Nightingale Ode* "an emblem of one limit of our experience : the impossibility of synthesizing, in the order of experience, the antinomy of the ideal and the real".....Allen Tate finds little to say in defence of the third stanza which, he says, is bad eighteenth-century personification, without on the one hand Pope's precision, or the energy of Blake on the other. "It gives us", says Tate, "a picture of common reality, in which the life of man is all mutability and frustration. But here if anywhere in the poem the necessity to dramatise time or the pressure of actuality, is paramount. Keats has no language of his own for this realm of experience."

**F.R. Leavis** has said that the *Ode To A Nightingale* records the poet's mood of indulgence and serves equally as an indulgence for the reader. Leavis is obviously being too severe or austere in his disapproval of the "fine excess" of the poem. Keats's profusion and prodigality, one must recognise, is here modified by a principle of sobriety. Wholeness, intensity, and naturalness are the qualities of this ode. Nature is, indeed, the real norm. Nature as it appears to the romantic imagination ; wholeness and intensity are attributes of Nature, as are freedom, ease, spontaneity, harmony, and sobriety. Imagined as the golden age of Flora and the country green, and more

fully as the forest of the nightingale, it becomes first the bird, the voice of Nature ; then the ideal poet , and finally the ideal itself. This Nature is the antithesis of the world of privation depicted in the third stanza.

**Cleanth Books and Robert Penn Warren on the  
'Ode To A Nightingale'**

In this poem the world of mankind and the world of the nightingale are contrasted with each other. The listener in the human world responds to the song of the nightingale, and feels an intense desire to find his way into the world in which the bird sings "of summer in full-throated ease". For the poet, the world of the nightingale is a world of richness and vitality. of deep sensuousness, of natural beauty and fertility ; this world appeals to the imagination and has its own ideality.

The reverie into which the poet falls carries him deep into the "embalmed darkness" out of which the bird is singing and deep into a communion in which he can make his peace even with death. But the meditative trance cannot last. With the very first word of the eighth stanza, the reverie is broken. The word "forlorn" occurs to the poet as the adjective describing the remote and magical world suggested by the nightingale's song. But the poet suddenly realises that this word applies with greater precision to himself. The effect is that of an abrupt stumbling. With the new and chilling meaning of "forlorn", the song of the nightingale itself alters : it becomes a "plaintive anthem". The song becomes fainter. What had before the power to make the sorrow in man fade away from a harsh and bitter world, now itself "fades" (line 75) and the poet is left alone in the silence.

The *Ode To A Nightingale* is a very rich poem. Two particular issues in it deserve attention. One is the close connection that the poet establishes between pleasure and pain : and the other is the connection between life and death.

The song of the nightingale has a curious double effect. It makes the poet's heart "ache", but this ache results from the poet's being too happy in the happiness of the nightingale. The song also acts as an opiate, making the poet feel drowsy and benumbed. Opiates are used to deaden pain, and in a sense the song of the bird does give the poet momentary relief from his unhappiness, oppressed as he is with the "weariness, the fever, and the fret" of the world of humanity.

Secondly, the nightingale's song makes the poet yearn to escape from a world overshadowed with death—"Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies", "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow". Yet when he has approached closest to the nightingale's world, the highest rapture that he can conceive of is to die—"To cease upon the midnight with no pain". The world of the nightingale is not a world untouched by death, but one in which death is not a negative and blighting thing. The question that arises is,

"What is it that prevents the poet from entering the world of the nightingale?" He tells us himself: it is the dull brain that perplexes and retards. The beaker of wine for which he had earlier called, and the free play of the imagination ("the viewless wings of Poesy")—both have this in common: they can release a man from the tyranny of the dull brain. The brain insists upon clarity and logical order; it is an order that must be dissolved if the poet is to escape into the richer world of the nightingale.

But the world of the nightingale is also a world characterised by darkness. We associate darkness with death, but this darkness is replete with the most intense life. This darkness is, indeed, emphasised: "shadows numberless" (line 9); "the forest dim" (line 20); "verdurous glooms" (line 40). Having entered the dim forest, the poet "cannot see". Though the fifth stanza abounds in sensuous detail and appeals so powerfully to all the senses, most of the images of sight are *fancied* by the poet. He does not actually see the Queen-Moon or the stars. He can only "guess" what flowers are at his feet. He has found his way into an "embalmed darkness". The word "embalmed" primarily means "sweet with balm", but the word is also suggestive of death. In finding his way imaginatively into the dark forest, the poet has approached death.

Keats has described the flowery environment of the nightingale with full honesty. His primary emphasis is on fertility and growth, but he accepts the fact that death and change have their place here too: the violets, for instance, are thought of as "fast-fading". But the atmosphere of this world of Nature is very different from that of the human world haunted by death, where men sit and hear each other groan. The world of Nature is a world of cyclic change: the "seasonable month", "the coming musk-rose". Consequently the world of Nature can appear fresh and immortal, like the bird whose song seems to be its spirit.

The poem is not only about man's world as contrasted with the world of Nature, or death and deathlessness, but also about alienation and wholeness. It is man's necessary alienation from Nature that makes death so horrible. To dissolve, to fade into the warm darkness is to merge into the eternal pattern of Nature. In such a communion, death itself becomes something positive—a flowering, a fulfilment.

The bird is not alienated from Nature, but wholly merged in Nature. The bird shares in the immortality of Nature which remains, through all its changes, unwearied and beautiful. The poet does not think this particular bird to be immortal. The bird is in harmony with its world—not, as man is, in competition with his ("No hungry generations tread thee down"); and the bird cannot conceive of its separation from the world which it expresses and of which it is a part. It is in this sense that the nightingale is immortal. Man knows that he is born to die, knows the weariness, the fever, and the

fret of the human world, knows in short "What thou among the leaves hast never known" (line 22) ; and this knowledge overshadows man's life and all his songs. Such knowledge overshadows this poem and gives it its special poignancy.

With the word "forlorn", the poet's attempt to enter the world of the nightingale collapses. The music which almost succeeded in making him "fade far away" now itself fades and in a moment is "buried deep in the next valley-glades" (lines 77-78).

#### **Richard Harter Fogle on the 'Ode To A Nightingale'**

This critic considers the *Ode To A Nightingale* to be a romantic poem of the family of *Kubla Khan* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* in that it describes a choice and rare experience which is remote from the commonplace. A treatment of this sort of experience requires great skill. The principal stress of the *Nightingale Ode*, according to this critic, is a struggle between ideal and actual. It also implies the opposition between pleasure and pain, imagination and reason, fullness and privation, permanence and change, Nature and the human, art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream.

The drugged dull pain in lines 1-4 is a frame and a contrast for the poignant pleasure of lines 6-10 ; at the same time it is inseparable from it. Extremes meet, as Keats has said in *A Song Of Opposites* and the *Ode On Melancholy*. They meet because they are extremes, as very hot and cold water are alike to the touch : their extremity is their affinity. Both pleasure and pain are in the opening stanza heightened, and meet a common intensity. The felicity which is permanent in the nightingale is transient and therefore excessive in the poet. It is so heavy a burden that it can be endured only briefly. Its attractions make everyday living ugly by contrast. Allen Tate refers to the *Nightingale Ode* as revealing the dilemma of the romantic imagination when faced with the contrast between the ideal and the real. Good romantic poems, like *Kubla Khan* and the *Nightingale Ode*, define this dilemma, dramatise it, and transform it to a source of strength.

The theme of the second stanza is abundance or fullness. The ideal lies in completeness. The nightingale sings in full-throated ease, and the beaker is full of the true, blushing Hippocrene. This fullness contrasts with the sad satiety of the third stanza, where but to think is to be full of sorrow ; it is modulated in the embalmed darkness of the fifth stanza ; and it ends in the sixth stanza in a climactic fullness of song, with the nightingale pouring forth her soul abroad in ecstasy.

The draught of vintage has been cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth ; the fountain of the Muses is the true, the blushing Hippocrene, and the beaker is brimful, with purple-stained mouth. Such concentration of effect is probably what Keats had in mind when he advised Shelley to "load every rift with ore."

The draught of vintage symbolises an imaginative escape from actuality. The longing to fade away into the forest dim is in order to avoid another kind of fading away, the melancholy dissolution of change and physical decay. In the third stanza a world of privation is substituted for the golden world of the second stanza. For ease is substituted the weariness, the fever, and the fret ; for abundance, a few, sad, last grey hairs. In this world of privation youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.

The privation of the third stanza is as vividly depicted as the ideal abundance of the second. The personifications of age, youth, beauty, and love are vitalised by their contexts ; they are comparable to "veiled Melancholy" in her "sovran shrine" in the *Ode On Melancholy*, and the personifications of *To Autumn*. The process of tedium, time, and decay is effectively conveyed in the third stanza, and the four-fold repetition of "Where" is a further reinforcement.

(According to Douglas Bush, the real theme of Keats's six great odes is the sadness of mutability.)

In the *Nightingale Ode*, Keats is affirming the value of the ideal, and this is the primary fact. He is also recognising the power of the actual, and this is an important but secondary consideration. Keats is at once agonised and amused at the inescapable discrepancy between them. He reconciles them by a prior imaginative acceptance of the unity of experience, by means of which he invests them with a common extremity and intensity of feeling. He need not give equal attention to both, for the actual can take care of itself ; it is the frail ideal which requires support.

The forest scene of the fourth stanza is romantically picturesque without being really pictorial : one does not visualise it, but its composition is describable in visual metaphor. The moonlight, a symbol of imagination, intermingling with darkness suggests the enchantment of mystery. After thus using suggestion Keats goes on, in the fifth stanza, to specification. The imagery in the fifth stanza is particular and sensuous, but not highly visual. Hawthorn, eglantine, violets, and musk-rose are important chiefly for their pastoral association. Here, as in the second stanza, the theme is fullness, but with an added pathos because of the introduction of darkness and death in the sixth stanza. The generous fertility of Nature is inseparable from the grave.

The death mentioned in the sixth stanza is a reasonable inference from the experience of the forest. As freedom, ease, intensity, fullness, and consummation the two are one. Death is easeful and rich. "To cease upon the midnight" is in one respect the same as "pouring forth thy soul abroad". In each is an outpouring, and a release from the prisoning self. This imaginative acceptance of death is not, however, without reservation. The poet has been only half in love with easeful death. The acceptance, in fact, includes the reserva-

tion, since it is an acceptance of the limits as well as the freedoms of this death :

Still wouldest thou sing, and I have ears in vain —  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

In a swift transition the death theme of the sixth stanza turns to a basis for the immortality of the nightingale in the seventh stanza. The objection that the nightingale is not immortal need not trouble us. The objection has been met by the suggestion that Keats is thinking of the race of nightingales, and not the individual nightingale. At any rate, the bird in this stanza is a universal and undying voice : the voice of Nature, of imaginative sympathy, and therefore of an ideal romantic poetry, infinitely powerful and profuse (compare the "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" of Shelley's *Skylark*, and the "music loud and long" of *Kubla Khan*). As sympathy, the voice of the nightingale resolves all differences : it speaks to high and low (emperor and clown) ; it comforts the human home-sickness of Ruth and frees her from bitter isolation : and equally it opens the casements of the remote and magical. Lines 65-70 combine the two kinds of romanticism—the domestic and the exotic. But both the kinds are linked by their common purpose of fusing the usual with the strange. Ruth is distanced and framed by time and rich association, but in relation to the magic casements she is homely and familiar. These magic casements are the climax of the imaginative experience.

The final stanza is a soft and quiet withdrawal from the heights. The word "forlorn" is like a bell which tolls the death of the imagination. Ruth is forlorn in her loneliness. The faery lands are pleasurable forlorn in a renioteness which is really the condition of their value. In any case, the word brings the poet to the common, everyday world. The fact that fancy cannot cheat so well is not a rejection of imagination but part of the total experience.

The *Ode To A Nightingale* contains the highest, the fullest, the most intense, the most valuable mental experience which Keats can imagine. This experience is the centre of the poem, and the basis of its unity. Within this unity, however, is a complex of feeling and thought which moves in alternate rises and falls, a series of waves. These waves are not of equal height ; they rise gradually to a climax in the seventh stanza, and the rise subsides in the conclusion.

### ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

#### I

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk :  
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thy happiness,—  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows' numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

## II

O for a draught of vintage, that hath been  
     Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
     Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
         Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth !  
     O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
         Full of the true, the blushing Hippocrate,  
             With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
                 And purple-stained mouth ;  
     That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
         And with thee fade away into the forest dim :

20

## III

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
     What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
     The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
         Here, where men sit and hear each other groan ;  
     Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
         Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies ;  
             Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
                 And leaden-eyed despairs ;  
     Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
         Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

30

## IV

Away ! away ! for I will fly to thee,  
     Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
     But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
         Though the dull brain perplexes and retards :  
     Already with thee ! tender is the night,  
         And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
             Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays ;  
                 But here there is no light,  
         Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
             Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. 40

## V

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
     Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
     But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
         Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
     The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild ;  
         White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine ;  
             Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves ;  
                 And mid-May's eldest child,  
         The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
             The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. 50

## VI

Darkling I listen ; and, for many a time  
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath ;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 . To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy !  
 Still wouldest thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

60

## VII

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird !  
 No hungry generations tread thee down :  
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown :  
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
 • She stood in tears amid the alien corn ;  
 The same that oft-times hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

70

## VIII

Forlorn ! the very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self !  
 Adieu ! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
 As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.  
 Adieu ! adieu ! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
 • \* Up the hill-side ; and now 'tis buried deep  
 In the next valley-glades :  
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream ?  
 Fled is that music :—Do I wake or sleep ?

80

## 5. Explanations

## Stanza 1. (Lines 1—10)

*My heart aches.....in thy happiness* (lines 1-6)—The poet's heart experiences a sensation of pain. His body is benumbed and paralysed. He is in a state of almost complete insensibility. It is as if he had drunk a numbing poison, or only a moment ago drunk every drop of a drug whose effect is to numb the senses and to blunt the feelings. He feels like one who has drunk the water of the River of Forgetfulness and become completely indifferent to his surroundings. This mood has not been brought upon him by any feeling of jealousy of the nightingale's joy. On the contrary, he has felt excessively happy because of the nightingale's happiness. His

numbness, drowsy pain, and the feeling of forgetfulness are the result of his spiritual ecstasy in the bird's joy.

*Light-winged Dryad of the trees*—According to ancient mythology, there were a number of inferior deities dwelling in groves, caves, springs, rivers, forests. Of these deities, Naiads lived in rivers; Oreads lived on hills; and Dryads lived in trees or forests. Here the nightingale is called a Dryad of the trees because it lives among trees. Light-winged, because it is capable of flying without much effort.

*Melodious plot of beechen green*—a piece of grassy land where green beech-trees are growing and which is full of the nightingale's melodious song.

*Singest of summer in full-throated ease* (line 10)—The bird seems to be singing of summer which is a lovely season in England. The bird sings in a loud voice, but it sings effortlessly and spontaneously.

**Note :** Lines 1-6 describe the poet's condition or mood which is a result of the nightingale's happiness. Lines 7-10 describe the nightingale singing in its rich and sweet voice amongst the trees. Lines 7-10 also provide an example of Keats's gift for word-painting.

### Stanza 2 (Lines 11—20)

*Draught of vintage*—drink of sweet wine. *Deep-delved earth*—Keats is very fond of compound forms like "light-winged" above and "deep-delved" here. *That hath been cooled a long age in the deep-delved earth*.—Keats would like to drink some wine which has been kept to mature and to cool deep under the ground. (Wine improves by age, if kept in cool cellars.)

*Flora*—goddess of the flowers and spring. *Provencal*—Provence is the name of a region in southern France. It is famous not only for its wines, but for its love of song and dance. *Sun-burnt mirth*—Another example of Keats's phrase-making power. This is an instance of what is known as a transferred epithet. Sun-burnt mirth means the mirth of sun-burnt people. Keats has not mentioned the people at all. Yet this phrase brings before our eyes a picture of merry, laughing, sun-burnt peasants. (*Sun-burnt*—one whose complexion has turned brown on account of the bright sunlight.)

**Explanation :** *O for a draught of vintage.....sun-burnt mirth* (lines 11-14)—Keats here expresses a desire to drink a wine that has been cooled for a long time deep under the earth. He thinks of a wine that will remind him of the flowers which have been used in the making of it. It will also remind him of the green vegetation of the countryside and of the dancing, music, merry-making, feasting of the sun-burnt peasants of Provence which is known for its fun, jollity and wines. In short, he wants a wine brewed in Provence.

**Note :** Here is an example of Keats's sensuousness. Keats is pre-eminently the poet of the senses. Lines 11-14 describe a delicious vintage and call up a picture of the feasting, merry-making and singing of a care-free people.

*Hippocrene*—the name of the fountain of the Muses. It was struck by the hoof of the winged horse Pegasus, out of Mount Helicon where the Muses lived. Keats imagines that this spring or fountain ran with wine instead of water.

*Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene*—Keats longs for a cup full of the genuine and richly-coloured wine that flows from the fountain of the Muses on Mount Helicon.

*Winking at the brim*—a beautiful phrase to describe the bubbles of wine sparkling at the top. *Purple-stained mouth*—another beautiful, richly sensuous phrase describing the mouth which has become red because red-coloured wine has been flowing into it.

### Stanza 3 (Lines 21—30)

*Fade far away* : Observe how the poet picks up the two words of the previous stanza and proceeds to amplify them. In this stanza, the poet describes the experiences which the nightingale has never known. These lines are very pessimistic and pathetic. They sum up the sorrow and tragedy of human life. The circumstances under which these lines were written should not be forgotten. Keats wrote the poem soon after the death of his brother Tom. He was himself suffering from tuberculosis. His love for Fanny Brawne had come to nothing.

*The weariness, the fever, and the fret* : This is an admirable line summing up the feeling of disappointment, the sense of disillusionment, the mood of despair, the state of boredom, the burden of responsibilities, the weight of worries, which a human being has to experience in life. This line reminds us of the following lines in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* :

- the fretful stir  
 •    • Unprofitable, and fever of the world.

*Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs* : A pathetic description of the old, miserable, bald-headed man afflicted with palsy.

*Leaden-eyed despairs* : the mood of despair which makes the eyes look dull like lead ; a settled gloom which robs the eyes of their brightness or lustre.

*Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes* : In this world the light of a beautiful woman's eyes soon fades away.

*Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow* : A man who has newly fallen in love with a beautiful woman having bright eyes has an uncontrollable and consuming passion for her. But this will not last long. His passion has a short duration just as the beauty of her eyes is short-lived.

**Note** : Love is as short-lived as beauty. The thought of this weighed on the heart of Keats who had recently been engaged to be married. The feeling of his own early death was already strong in him.

**Explanation :** *Fade far away, dissolve.....beyond tomorrow—*

The poet expresses a desire to melt away from the world of human beings, and to escape into the trees where he can forget life's sorrows and misfortunes from which the nightingale is quite free. He wishes to forget the fatigue, the depressing and tiresome conditions of life, and the anxieties and cares of the world where people are constantly suffering sorrows and uttering cries of pain. Old, disappointed, gray-headed men are afflicted with palsy. Young men decline, wither, grow thin like skeletons, and die. A moment's reflection induces a mood of sadness in a human being, and he falls into a mood of hopelessness.

**Lack-lustre eyes**—Beautiful women cannot retain the brightness of their eyes for long, and the passion of youthful lovers has only a short duration.

#### *Stanza 4 (Lines 31—40)*

**For I will fly to thee, not charioted by Bacchus and his pards—**  
The poet decides to escape into the forest, not carried in Bacchus's chariot which is drawn by leopards. Bacchus was the god of wine and, in ancient art, he is represented as riding in a chariot drawn by leopards. The poet means to say that he will not escape into the forest by drinking wine as he had first desired.

**But on the viewless wings of Poesy**—He will escape into the forest, carried on the wings of his poetic imagination.

**Though the dull brain perplexes and retards**—although his imaginative flight to the forest is hindered and hampered by the weakness and irresolution of his brain or mind. Or, the flight of fancy is obstructed by the rational side of his personality. Reason or logic is an obstacle in the way of the flights of fancy.

**Note :** The poet escapes into the forest and joins the nightingale by virtue of his poetic fancy. Lines 35-40 describe the beauty of Nature in the midst of which the poet finds himself. He looks upon the moon as a queen surrounded by her attendant fairies, that is, stars.

**But here there is no light.....winding mossy ways**—But there is no light in the forest except that which is brought from above by the winds and which finds its way with difficulty through the thick leaves and branches of trees overgrown with moss.

#### *Stanza 5 (Lines 41—50)*

**Note :** Here is another rich feast for the senses. These are most sweet and fragrant lines because of the various flowers which are described. This stanza, again, appeals to the senses of sight, smell, and touch.

**Incense**—something sweet or fragrant : here it means blossoms. **Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs**—nor can the poet see what tender and sweet-smelling blossoms grow on the branches of trees.

*Embalmed darkness*—Another pretty phrase. The darkness in which the poet stands is sweetened by the flowers and the blossoms. In other words, the darkness is sweet-smelling. (The word “embalmed” also carries a suggestion of death because of the practice in ancient times of embalming dead bodies.)

*The seasonable month*—the month of May which is the season of many flowers.

**Explanation :** *But in embalmed darkness.....fruit-tree wild*—The darkness of the forest is loaded with a sweet fragrance. By these sweet smells, the poet can guess the various flowers which the flowery month of May has produced in the grassy wood, and he can also guess what sweet blossoms grow on the wild fruit-trees in the forest.

*White hawthorn*—hawthorn of white colour. (Hawthorn is a kind of bush that bears flowers). *Pastoral*—growing in the forest. *Eglantine*—sweet-brier and other varieties of rose. *Mid-May's eldest child*—the first flower of this season ; the first flower of the middle of May. (Eldest child is the first-born child. Hence the first flower here.)

*Full of dewy wine*—the musk-rose, full of a sweet juice. *Haunt*—the place or spot which is much visited.

*The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves*—On summer evenings, murmuring flies will crowd in large numbers over musk-roses (which are full of a sweet juice). The musk-roses will be the favourite gathering places for the murmuring flies.

**Note :** The music of the long vowels in this line is note-worthy. This is also an example of onomatopeia because the sound of words here produces the murmur of the flies.

#### Stanza 6 (Lines 51—60)

*Darkling*—in the darkness. *Easeful death*—death that would soothe the poet ; death that would end the poet's troubles. *Mused rhyme*—well thought-out verses ; lines of poetry that have carefully been pondered over. *To take into the air my quiet breath*—to put an end to the life of the poet.

*Requiem*—a hymn or dirge in which the mourners praise a dead person. The song of the nightingale would become a funeral song when the poet dies. *Sod*—a piece of earth with grass growing on it.

**Explanation :** *Darkling I listen.....become a sod* (Line: 51-60)—In the darkness of the forest, the poet listens to the song of the nightingale. He says that on many occasions in the past he felt attracted by death which ends a man's troubles and brings him peace and comfort. Many times he has written thoughtful and reflective poems in which he has fondly addressed death and appealed to it to put a stop to his breathing. At this particular moment, death seems to be more attractive than it has ever seemed before. He would, therefore, like to die a painless death at this

hour of midnight when the nightingale is singing with such abandon and freedom its sweet and rapturous song which comes from the innermost depths of its being. The nightingale would continue to sing even when the poet is dead. He would then no longer be able to hear its song. He would become as deaf as a piece of earth to the noble hymn or mournful song that it will be singing. (There is a slight contradiction here, because previously the poet has called the bird's song happy and joyous while now he regards it as a mournful song. Here he calls it a mournful song because he is thinking of the possibility of his own death at this hour. This contradiction need not disturb us. Poetry is not to be judged by the laws of logic. The mood of the poet is of great importance, and the development of thought in a poem is often determined by the changing moods of the writer.)

*Stanza 7 (Lines 61—70)*

*No hungry generations tread thee down*—Human beings and nations try to destroy one another as if they were hungry for one another's blood. But the nightingale is quite safe. There are no wars of destruction among nightingales. It is not a victim of the foolish love of conquest of which men are the victims. Among men, each succeeding generation in the struggle of life tramples on its predecessor.

*The voice I hear.....emperor and clown*—The song which the nightingale is singing and to which the poet is listening this passing night is the same which must have been heard centuries ago by rich and poor alike. The poet looks upon men as mortal and upon the nightingale as immortal. He is contrasting the *general* nightingale with the *individual* man. In other words, he is contrasting the race of nightingales with a single human being. Of course, the comparison is not logical or rational but the stanza is beautiful poetry. We may justify the comparison by saying that he is contrasting the song of the nightingale with the individual human life. The song of the nightingale has a permanence and an endless life, which the individual human life does not possess.

*Ruth*—Ruth was a Moabite married to a Jew in Moab. After her husband died, she migrated to the alien land of Judah in Palestine in order to share her mother-in-law's troubles. There she gleaned corn in the fields of a kinsman. The story of Ruth occurs in the Bible.

**Explanation :** *Perhaps the self-same song.....alien corn* (lines 65-67)—Perhaps the song to which the poet is listening this night is the same which was heard by Ruth when, feeling depressed, homesick, and broken-hearted, she stood weeping in a corn-field, far, far away from her native home. The idea is that the voice of the nightingale has not changed since the time when the melancholy Ruth heard it centuries ago.

*The same that oft-times hath charmed magic casements*—Perhaps the voice in which the nightingale is singing at this time is the same as fell with a delightful or bewitching effect upon the windows of a castle that stood on the sea-shore.

*Magic casements.....forlorn*: We are here to imagine some strange, far-off, lonely, enchanted land of beauty and mystery. We have to suppose that in this land is situated a palace or a castle on the shore of a stormy, dangerous ocean. Further, we have to imagine that the windows of this palace or castle open on a view of the ocean with its foam-covered waves rising high and striking against one another. There is some kind of magic about these windows ; that is, some supernatural power controls them.

**Note** : Lines 68—70 are, perhaps, the finest lines in the whole poetry of Keats and some of the finest in the entire range of English poetry. The qualities that give them distinction and lend them charm are the bold reach of imagination, suggestiveness, romantic associations, and melody.

### *Stanza 8 (Lines 71—80)*

**Explanation** : *Forlorn ! the very word.....my sole self!*—The use of the word “*forlorn*” comes like a shock to the poet. The sound of this word is like the sound of a bell which breaks the spell and which brings the poet back from the company of the nightingale to his lonely self. This word interrupts the poet’s imagination and calls him back to the realities of life, as the ringing of an alarm-bell might do.

**Explanation** : *Adieu ! the fancy cannot.....elf*: The poet’s imaginative reflections have been interrupted. He now remembers the reality and finds that he is not with the nightingale but alone. He, therefore, bids farewell to the bird. The imagination of a poet cannot create durable illusions as it is supposed to do. The poetic imagination is just like a deceptive fairy whom we take to be real but who turns out to be unreal. The poet means that he can no longer continue to imagine himself as being in the forest with the nightingale. He had gone into the forest with the help of his imagination, and now his imagination is failing.

*Plaintive*—conveying a complaint; mournful. *Anthem*—song.  
*Valley-glades*—open spaces of the valley.

**Explanation** : *Adieu ! Adieu !.....valley-glades*: The poet bids farewell to the bird’s sad song because it is departing and is therefore, becoming more and more distant. It seems to him that the song is now reaching him from the fields nearby. The next moment, the song has become a little more distant as if it were coming from near the silent stream. And then it seems still more distant. Finally, it is completely lost among the open spaces of the valley.

**Note** : In stanza 1, the poet has called the nightingale’s song happy and joyous. In stanza 6, he calls it a requiem (that is, a song pertaining to death). Here he calls it a “plaintive anthem”. In stanza 6, he calls it a requiem because he is thinking of his own death ; and here he considers it a plaintive anthem because he has been recalled to reality and has, therefore, received something of a

shock. (Moreover, the traditional idea of the nightingale's song is that of a sad lament.)

**Explanation:** *Was it a vision.....wake or sleep*—The song is now no longer audible. The poet, therefore, wonders whether it was an actual song or he was merely seeing a vision. The music is now no more. The poet asks whether he was really awake or merely dreaming in his sleep.

**Note:** As the music of the nightingale fades, the poet's imagination also fails. The vision that he had been seeing is no longer before him and he realises that he has travelled back from the regions of poetic phantasy into the world of common reality.

## VI. ODE ON MELANCHOLY

### 1. Introduction

Originally this poem opened with a stanza which was subsequently cancelled. That stanza contains a picture of a spectre ship, and has a grotesque and grisly character. It contains a number of horrifying details. At the time Keats wrote this poem, he was reading Richard Burton's famous book *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. In purpose Burton's book is a medical treatise. The introduction sets out that melancholy is an inbred malady in everyone of us. But the subject is expanded until it covers the whole life of man. The treatment is marked by a sense of humour and pathos, and a tolerant spirit of religion. In the exposition and illustration of his argument, Burton uses quotation or paraphrase to an extreme degree, drawing on a very wide field of literature.

Keats soon realised that though the original opening stanza of his poem might suit Richard Burton's purpose, it was not a suitable subject for him. In any case, that accounts for the abrupt opening of the poem as it stands at present: "No, no, go not to Lethe". The warning contained in these words is against false melancholy, courted for the sake of the supposed oblivion it brings.

The general idea of the poem is that true melancholy is to be found not in the sad and ugly things of life but in the beauty and pleasures of the world. The world's true sadness dwells with beauty and joy, for the pain of suffering is less acute than the pain of knowing that beauty and joy will soon fade. The poem expresses Keats's experience of the habitual interchange and alternation of the emotions of joy and pain. True melancholy is to be felt precisely in those experiences which are also most happy.

### 2. Critical Summary

The poet disapproves of our seeking oblivion when we are in a melancholy mood. It would be natural for a man in a melancholy mood to feel a desire for some sleep-inducing drug, such as the juice obtained from wolf's-bane or from night-shade. A man in a melan-

choly mood would like to have a rosary of yew-berries and to seek the companionship of such sorrowful creatures as the beetle, the death-moth, and the owl. A man in a melancholy mood would either like an intoxicant to benumb him or would seek the company of sorrowful creatures who, in his opinion, seem to respond to his mood. But Keats condemns this quest for a melancholy which is false. Sleep-inducing drugs and the company of sorrowful creatures will have a drowsy effect upon the mind of a man and would lull to sleep the pain which should be kept awake in the heart (*Stanza I*)

True melancholy lies in the ache at the heart of felicity. It comes to a man suddenly even as rain may suddenly begin to fall from a cloud above. When this true melancholy visits the heart of a man, he can have his fill of sorrow by gazing at the beauty of a morning rose, or at the colours produced by the sunlight playing on wet sand, or at the abundance of round-shaped peonies.\* The beauty of all things is short-lived, and the very realisation of its short life will sadden a man. Another way of having one's fill of sorrow is to seize the soft hand of one's mistress and gaze fondly into her peerless eyes when her face is glowing with anger and when she protests vehemently against the advances of love. The rich anger of the mistress is also something short-lived, like her beauty and softness, and this realisation of the transitory nature of such pleasurable things will also serve to sadden a man. (*Stanza II*)

Indeed, true melancholy is to be found in the company of beautiful things which have a short existence. It is to be found in the company of joy which is fleeting. It is to be found in the company of pleasure the very intensity of which makes that pleasure painful. In other words, true melancholy lies not in the ugly and sad things of life (enumerated in the first stanza); it does not lie in death or the accompaniments of death. On the contrary, it lies in everything that is beautiful and joyful. True melancholy has its shrine in the very temple of Delight. True melancholy is inseparable from a consciousness and a contemplation of beautiful things and inseparable from the experience of joy and pleasure. For this reason, only that person can experience the finest shades of melancholy who has a capacity for enjoying the raptures of delight. Melancholy can claim to have power over those persons who are capable of experiencing the ecstasies of joy. He who has a dull or blunt soul which is incapable of experiencing an intensity of pleasure can never have any experience of a feeling of true melancholy.

### 3. Critical Appreciation

The poem has an abrupt opening, the reason being that the original first stanza of it was subsequently cancelled by Keats. In the poem as it stands, the first stanza contains a warning to us against false melancholy which we might court for the sake of the supposed oblivion it brings. True melancholy is not to be found in any of the

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\* *peonies*—flower-plants.

sad or ugly things which find a mention in this first stanza—wolf's-bane, night-shade, yew-berries, the beetle, the death-moth, etc. True melancholy is the ache at the heart of felicity. True melancholy is to be found in everything that is beautiful and joyful—"She dwells with Beauty and Joy".

The poem offers a paradox which is, however, easily resolved. True melancholy lives with beauty and with joy, because in the very act of our apprehending beauty and joy we experience the realisation that both beauty and joy are short-lived, a realisation which produces the truest sadness in our hearts.

The poem contains some exquisite imagery which is characteristic of Keats's sensuous temperament. The picture of rain falling from a cloud above on the drooping flowers below is simply beautiful, like the pictures of the sunlight playing on the wet sand and the wealth of "globed peonies". But even more beautiful is the picture of a man squeezing the soft hand of his beloved who is in an unresponsive mood and who, therefore, feels provoked by her lover's advances :

Or, if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

The idea of the transitoriness of beauty and joy is vividly conveyed by means of a concrete picture, with personifications of beauty and joy in addition to the personification of melancholy which is the theme of the poem :

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die ;  
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu.....

The transitoriness of pleasure, too, is also vividly expressed. Pleasure, we are told, turns to poison in the very process of being enjoyed :

and aching Pleasure nigh,  
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips :

True melancholy can be tasted only by him who has a capacity for experiencing the keenest pleasure :

Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovereign shrine,  
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine.

The concrete and sensuous imagery in the poem is fully characteristic of Keats's poetical genius.

A note of melancholy inevitably runs through the poem. There are exquisite pictures in the second and third stanzas of the poem, but they have all the effect of producing a feeling of sadness in us. Melancholy dwells with beauty in the poem itself. The mood of dejection of the writer finds here a beautiful expression as it does in the *Ode To A Nightingale*.

The felicity of word and phrase is also to be noted. Phrases like the "ruby grape of Proserpine", "a partner in your sorrow's mysteries", "the wakeful anguish of the soul", "the droop-headed flowers", "the wealth of globed peonies", "emprison her soft hand", "her sovereign shrine", illustrate the beauty and originality of Keats's poetic language.

## ODE ON MELANCHOLY

## I

No, no ! go not to Lethe, neither twist  
 Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine ;  
 Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd  
 By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine ;  
 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
 Nor let the beetle nor the death-moth be  
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
 A partner in your sorrow's mysteries ;  
 For shade to shade will come too drowsily,  
 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

10

## II

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
 Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
 That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
 And hides the green hill in an April shroud ;  
 Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
 Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
 Or on the wealth of globed peonies :  
 Or, if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
 Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
 And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

20

## III

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die ;  
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
 Bidding adieu ; and aching Pleasure nigh,  
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips :  
 Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
 Veil'd Melancholy has her sovereign shrine,  
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue  
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine ;  
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,  
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

30

## 4. Explanations

*Stanza I (Lines 1—10)*

**Note.** The first stanza of this poem contains a catalogue of all those things which by convention or because of legendary associations are suggestive of melancholy. In a fit of melancholy, one usually

turns to things that are mentioned in this stanza. But the poet would not have us seek these things because these things would merely bring about a mood of forgetfulness or oblivion. A mood of oblivion is not the right mood for melancholy, because the mood of oblivion means an escape from melancholy, not a full-blooded experience of melancholy.

*Lethe*—the river of forgetfulness ; by drinking from the water of this river the spirits of the dead could obtain forgetfulness. ("Lethe" is mentioned in ancient classical mythology.)

*No, no ! go not to Lethe*—those who seek melancholy should not seek it by drinking the water of forgetfulness. True melancholy cannot be experienced through a forgetfulness of oneself or one's surroundings.

*Wolf's-bane*—the name of a poisonous plant.

*Neither twist/Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine*—The seeker after melancholy is urged not to squeeze the poisonous juice from wolf's-bane with its strong, stiff roots. The poisonous juice of wolf's-bane would induce a mood of drowsiness or numbness which, again, is not the proper method of experiencing melancholy.

*Nor suffer thy pale forehead ....Proserpine* (Lines 3-4)—Proserpine or Proserpina was an earthly goddess who was carried off by Pluto, the king of the underworld. Proserpina's mother, Ceres, felt grieved by her loss to such an extent that Jupiter, the supreme god, felt compelled to send his messenger Mercury to bring Proserpina back. Proserpina had unthinkingly eaten part of a pomegranate (or a grape) in the underworld, with the consequence that even Mercury could not obtain her release.

The ruby grape refers to the vivid red berries of the night-shade which is one of the most poisonous plants.

The poet discourages a seeker after melancholy to seek contact with the black fruit of the poisonous night-shade, because contact with this fruit or the eating of this fruit will merely induce a sleepy feeling. This sleepy feeling will, again, make it impossible for a man to have a genuine taste of melancholy.

*Yew berries*—The yew has mournful associations because this tree is often grown in churchyards. The poet asks the seeker after melancholy not to have anything to do with the fruit of the yew tree. (The rosary is a string of beads by which people of certain religions count their prayers.)

*Beetle*—an insect which produces a sound that is interpreted by superstitious people as an omen of death. The sound of the beetle is really a call to its mate.

*Death-moth*—a kind of moth that utters a low, mournful sound.

*Nor the death-moth be your mournful Psyche*—The poet would not like the seeker after melancholy to regard the mournful sounds of the death-moth as a symbol of his melancholic love. [Psyche—

here the word is used in the sense of spirit, soul, or mind. *Mournful Psyche*—melancholic soul ; melancholic love.]

*Nor the downy owl a partner in your sorrow's mysteries*—Nor should the melancholy person try to associate with the owl which is the bird of night and which too is a symbol of sadness. A sorrowful man should not turn to the owl for its company because the companionship of the owl will not help a man to experience the full sharpness of his misery. (*Downy*—this refers to the soft thick feathers of the owl.)

*For shade to shade.....anguish of the soul* (Lines 9.10)—By associating with these mournful things, a man will simply begin to feel drowsy and numb, and will thus be rendered incapable of experiencing the real taste of sorrow. A man in a fit of melancholy should not seek numbness and oblivion. He should allow his soul or mind to remain alert, and he should allow the pain in his heart to remain awake. Only through a mental alertness, and not numbness, will he be able to experience the fine savour of sorrow.

**Note :** The poet means to say that true melancholy does not lie in things which are sad or ugly, which have mournful associations, and which tend to produce a feeling of drowsiness or numbness. Lethe, wolf's-bane with its poisonous juice, night-shade, yew berries, the sounds of the beetle and of the death-moth—these are all the symbols of oblivion or death. The death-moth, the rosary of yew berries, and the poisonous wine are approximate equivalents to the beetle and to the downy owl. All these are images associated with melancholy. A man in a fit of melancholy will, therefore, naturally turn to such images. But things are best understood by contrast. To appreciate the nature of melancholy, one should not turn to melancholy things, but to things which offer a contrast (and which are mentioned in the lines that follow). The wakeful perception of the soul should not be lulled to sleep. The melancholy man should not try to deaden his sensibility ; on the contrary he should try to sharpen his awareness. One should not dodge melancholy through oblivion ; on the contrary, one should use melancholy for a further and deeper experience of it. The wakefulness of the soul is to be valued, even though the feeling of melancholy may become so intense as to cause pain.

**Note :** Apart from the main idea of the first stanza, the putting together of opposites such as wine and poison, kissing and death should be noted.

#### • Stanza II (Lines 11—20)

*But when the melancholy fit shall fall.....in an April shroud* (Lines 11-4)—The following pictures are to be noted in these lines : (a) a weeping cloud which means a cloud from which drops of rain are falling. But the use of the word “weeping” has a direct relation to melancholy. (b) The rain from the weeping cloud fosters or nourishes all the droop-headed flowers, that is, flowers

which were drooping previously because of the want of rain. (c) The rain leads to a growth of green grass on the hill, and this green grass may be regarded as a shroud for it. The word "shroud", which means a sheet in which a dead body is wrapped up, again has melancholy associations.

What is to be especially noted here is the putting together of opposites or the paradoxical combination of images. On one hand are the flowers in the beautiful month of April ; on the other hand are the weeping cloud and the shroud in the form of the green grass. It is in the spring month of April when there is a wealth of natural beauty everywhere that the fit of melancholy will suddenly take possession of a human being. Thus Keats is here referring to the ache at the heart of felicity, or the feeling of acute pain that springs from the very perception of beautiful things.

*Glut thy sorrow*—have your fill of sorrow ; have as much of sorrow as is necessary to satisfy you. The poet would like us to have our fill of sorrow in the companionship of the beautiful things which he now goes on to mention. He has discouraged the seeker after melancholy to seek the company of sad and ugly things because they merely benumb the mind. True melancholy can be experienced through contact with beautiful things such as are mentioned below—a morning rose, the colours of the salt sand-wave, the abundance of globed peonies, the rich anger of one's mistress. Thus the truest melancholy or sadness dwells in the company of beautiful things. This is again a paradoxical statement. The idea is that the pleasure of looking at a beautiful thing is accompanied by the pain of knowing that this beauty is short-lived.

*Morning rose*—a rose that blooms in the morning. *The rainbow of the salt sand-wave*—a beautiful picture based on the play of sunlight on sand made wet by a retreating wave. *Globed*—round-shaped. *Peonies*—flowers. (A peony is a flower-plant.)

*Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows.....upon her peerless eyes* (Lines 18-20)—This is a most wonderful and yet realistic picture of a mistress getting angry with her lover and the lover who, instead of getting provoked or irritated, seizes her soft hand and gazes into her marvellously beautiful eyes. There is a contrast here between the anger in the eyes of the mistress and the fondness in the eyes of the lover. The very anger of the mistress is "rich anger". Her anger lends to her a new glory. The lover falls in love with her even deeper. He catches hold of her soft hand, though she angrily resists his move, and experiences an intense pleasure by looking into her peerless eyes.

It is believed that, in writing these lines, Keats was thinking of Fanny Brawne for whom he had an overwhelming passion and who did not respond to his love. Fanny Brawne would certainly be raving if Keats were to imprison her soft hand as indicated here.

**Note :** A number of beautiful things are mentioned in this stanza, but the beauty of all these things is fleeting or short-lived.

The future of the morning rose is uncertain as the day proceeds. "Suppose a rose to have sensation", wrote Keats, "it blooms on a beautiful morning, it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun." The rainbow of the wave is even more fleeting, for it forms as the wave rises to its crest and breaks. The anger of the mistress, one may suppose, is equally short-lived. Yet even though these are momentary and fleeting things, one can possess them. One can "glut" sorrow on a rose, and "feed deep" upon the eyes of the mistress ; and these images, presenting the sense of sight in terms of taste, suggest the intensity of the response. Similarly, the phrase "globed peonies" suggests the hand cupping the flowers in a full enjoyment of their beauty. At the same time, such expressions as "glut" or "feed deep" imply a prolonging of the experience as it occurs. The word "empison" has a similar force, indicating a desire to arrest and hold tightly.

These beautiful objects fade quickly, and to turn to them means nourishing the melancholy fit. This idea is generalised in the final stazna.

**Note :** The anger of the mistress is significant only in its richness, not in any sexual implication. "It is rich because it offers a possibility of feeding deeply upon an animated beauty that is doomed to lose all motion, all force. Animation, as in its root meaning, here reveals the living soul in full activity, with the special poignance in this poem that is definitive of true melancholy, consciousness of mutability and death."—(Harold Bloom).

### Stanza III (Lines 21—30)

*She dwells with Beauty*—Melancholy is to be found in the company of Beauty. ("Melancholy" is personified and here referred to as "she".)

*Beauty that must die*—Beauty is short-lived. All beautiful things have a transitory existence.

*And Joy, whose hand.....adieu*—Melancholy is to be found in the company of Joy which also is short-lived. Joy too is here personified. Joy is regarded as a person who is about to depart and who is therefore raising his hand to his lips in order to bid farewell.

*And aching Pleasure nigh.....the bee-mouth sips*—Melancholy is to be found in the company of Pleasure which by its very intensity becomes painful. ("Melancholy dwells close to the Pleasure whose keenness merges into pain"). The bee flies about sucking the sweetness of flowers. The bee is, therefore, a symbol of the pleasure-seeker. A pleasure-seeker, while experiencing the sensations of pleasure, discovers that the sweetness of his pleasure is turning to poison in the very process of his tasting that pleasure. Joy, when it is very intense, becomes painful because its intensity is unbearable. (Wordsworth, in his *Tintern Abbey*, speaks of "aching joys and dizzy raptures").

*'She dwells with Beauty.....the bee-moth sips* (Lines 21-24)—Line 21 solves the problem that had arisen in the mind of the reader after reading the second stanza. The second stanza calls upon us to have our fill of melancholy or sorrow by contact with beautiful things. That sounds a paradoxical statement. Now, in the lines that follow, the puzzle occasioned by the second stanza is resolved. True melancholy results from a contemplation of beautiful things and an experience of joy or pleasure. When we look at beautiful things, the feeling rises in our minds that these beautiful things have a short life. This feeling of the transitoriness of beautiful things must give rise to a feeling of melancholy. Similarly, when we experience a feeling of intense joy or extreme pleasure, this experience has a very short duration and must be followed by a feeling of melancholy. Besides, the very intensity of pleasure, by being unbearable, causes pain. Thus true melancholy should not be sought in the ugly and sad things of life (as mentioned in the first stanza), but in the beautiful objects which have been indicated in the second stanza. "True melancholy is the ache at the heart of felicity." It is caused by the sense of tears in mortal things.

*Ay—yes. the very temple of Delight—the very abode of joy and pleasure. Sovran—sovereign. Ay, in the very temple.....sovran shrine*—The idea of the preceding four lines is repeated here in a different form. The altar of melancholy, paradoxically speaking, is to be found in the very temple where we would normally seek delight. In other words, melancholy and delight go hand in hand. Pleasure is inseparable from the melancholy which is bound to result from an experience of pleasure.

*Strenuous tongue*—powerful or forceful tongue.

*Palate*—sense of taste.

*Though seen of none.....his palate fine*—Only those can see the altar of melancholy in the temple of Delight, who have enough force in their tongues to be able to break the grape of joy in order to taste the excellent savour of that grape. The idea is here conveyed metaphorically. Joy is compared to a grape. Only he can experience the delicious taste of the grape whose tongue is strong enough to be able to break it when he puts it in his mouth. In other words, only he can experience the finest shades of melancholy who has the capacity to appreciate the ecstasies of pleasure.

*His soul shall taste the sadness of her might*—Only such a man can fully experience melancholy or sadness in its full intensity. The intensity of sadness can fully be experienced only by the man who is capable of experiencing the raptures of delight.

*And be among her cloudy trophies hung*—Only such a man can fully be conquered by the powerful melancholy. The temple of delight where melancholy has her shrine may be regarded as an airy temple. In this airy temple the souls of men are like clouds hanging upon the walls of the temple as if they were the trophies won by melancholy. A trophy is a symbol of conquest. If melancholy may

be regarded as the conqueror, the souls of men are the trophies. That is to say, only those souls have the honour of being conquered by melancholy who are capable of enjoying the raptures of delight.

"The magnificence of the *Ode On Melancholy's* final stanza is in its exactness of diction as it defines the harmony of continued apprehension of its unresolved contraries. Only Beauty that *must die* is beauty ; Joy cannot be present without simultaneously bidding adieu : and *aching* Pleasure is immanent only by turning to poison for us, even as we sip its real honey. For, like the rest of Keats's odes, this poem is tragic, it reaches beyond the disillusionments of a state of experience into the farther innocence of a poet's paradise... ...The *strenuous* tongue does not simply sip the grape's juice ; it *bursts* the grape of Joy, with the inevitable double consequence of tasting might and the sadness of might."—(Harold Bloom)

## VII. ODE TO AUTUMN

### 1. Introduction

This poem was written by Keats in September, 1819. He was greatly struck by the beauty of the season. The air was fine, and there was a temperate sharpness about it. The weather seemed "chaste". The stubble-fields looked better than they did in spring. Keats was so impressed by the beauty of the weather that he recorded his mood in the form of this ode.

The *Ode To Autumn* ranks among the finest poems of Keats. The treatment of the subject is perfectly objective or impersonal. The poet keeps himself completely out of the picture. He only describes certain sights and sounds without expressing his personal reaction to these sights and sounds. The poem is a perfect Nature-lyric. No human sentiment finds expression ; only the beauty and bounty of Nature during autumn are described.

Sometimes this ode is taken as having an autobiographical quality : it is possible to connect its serenity with the way of Keats's own life. However, it is almost certain that he has simply tried to catch the spirit of an autumn afternoon.

### 2. Critical Summary

Here is a poem in which a season has been personified and made to live. In the first stanza, the poet describes the fruits of autumn, the fruits coming to maturity in readiness for harvesting. In the second stanza, autumn is personified as a woman present at the various operations of the harvest and at cider-pressing. In the last stanza, the end of the year is associated with sunset ; the songs of spring are over and night is falling, but there is no feeling of sadness because autumn has its own songs. The close of the ode, though solemn, breathes the spirit of hope.

**The fruits of autumn :** Autumn is a season of ripe fruitfulness. It is the time of the ripening of grapes, apples, gourds, hazel-

nuts, etc. It is also the time when the bees suck the sweetness from "later flowers" and make honey. Thus autumn is pictured in the stanza as bringing all the fruits of earth to maturity in readiness for harvesting.

**The occupations of autumn.** In the second stanza, autumn is seen in the person of a reaper, a winnower, a gleaner, and a cider-presser. Reaping, winnowing, gleaning and cider-pressing are all operations connected with the harvest and are, therefore, carried on during autumn. Autumn is depicted firstly as a harvester sitting carelessly in the field during a winnowing operation ; secondly as a tired reaper fallen asleep in the very midst of reaping ; thirdly, as a gleaner walking homewards with a load on the head ; and fourthly, as a cider-presser watching intently the apple-juice flowing out of the cider-press.

**The songs of autumn :** Autumn is not altogether devoid of music. If spring has its songs, autumn too has its sounds and songs. In the evening, when the crimson light of the setting sun falls upon the stubble-fields, a chorus of natural sounds is heard. The gnats utter their mournful sounds ; the full-grown lambs bleat loudly ; the hedge-crickets chirp ; the robin's high and delicate notes are heard ; and the swallows twitter in the sky. In this last stanza the close of the year is associated with sunset and night-fall.

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**Its faultless construction :** This is the most faultless of Keats's odes in point of construction. The first stanza gives us the bounty of Autumn, the second describes the occupations of the season, and the last dwells upon its sounds. Indeed, the poem is a complete and concrete picture of Autumn, "the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness."

**Its sensuousness :** The bounty of Autumn has been described with all its sensuous appeal. The vines suggesting grapes, the apples, the gourds, the hazels with their sweet kernel, the bees suggesting honey—all these appeal to our senses of taste and smell. The whole landscape is made to appear fresh and scented. There is great concentration in each line of the first stanza. Each line is like the branch of a fruit-tree laden with fruit to the breaking-point.

**Its vivid imagery :** The second stanza contains some of the most vivid pictures in English poetry. Keats's pictorial quality is here seen at its best. Autumn is personified and presented to us in the figure of the winnower, "sitting careless on a granary floor", the reaper "on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep", the gleaner keeping "steady thy laden head across a brook", and a spectator watching with patient look a cider-press and the last oozings therefrom. The reaper, the winnower, the gleaner, and the cider-presser symbolise Autumn. These pictures make the poem human and universal because the eternal labours of man are brought before the eyes of the reader.

**The poet's keen observation of Nature :** The third stanza is a collection of the varied sounds of Autumn—the choir of gnats, the bleating of lambs, the singing of crickets, the whistling of red-breasts, and the twittering of swallows. Keats's interest in small and homely creatures is fully evidenced in these lines. The whole poem demonstrates Keats's interest in Nature and his keen and minute observation of natural sights and sounds. Keats's responsiveness and sensitivity to natural phenomena is one of the striking qualities of his poetry.

**Its objectivity and its Greek character :** The poem is characterised by complete objectivity. The poet keeps himself absolutely out of the picture. Nor does he express any emotion whether of joy or melancholy. He gives the objects of feeling, not the feeling itself. The poem is written in a calm and serene mood. There is no discontent, no anguish, no bitterness of any kind. There is no philosophy in the poem, no allegory, no inner meaning. We are just brought face to face with "Nature in all her richness of tint and form". The poem breathes the spirit of Greek poetry. In fact, it is one of the most Greek compositions by Keats. There is the Greek touch in the personification of Autumn and there is the Greek note in the poet's impersonal manner of dwelling upon Nature.

**Felicity of diction :** We have here the usual felicity of diction for which Keats is famous. Phrases like "mellow fruitfulness", "maturing sun", "hair soft-lifted", "barred clouds" which "bloom the soft-dying day", "hilly bourn" are examples of Keats's happy coinages. Nor is poetic artifice wanting to add beauty to the verse. The alliteration in the following lines is, for instance, noteworthy :

To smell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
 With a sweet kernel ; to set budding more,  
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
 Until they think warm days will never cease,  
 For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Several words here contain the same "z" sound—hazel, shells, flowers, bees, days, cease, cells. The abundance of "m" sound in these lines is also noteworthy : plump, more, warm, summer, brimm'd, clammy.

**Its form :** The rhyme-scheme in this ode is the same (except for a little variation) in all the stanzas each of which consists of 11 lines. Thus it is a "regular" ode.

"Most satisfying of all the *Odes*, in thought and expression, is the *Ode To Autumn*. Most satisfying because, for all the splendour of diction in the others, there are times when the poetic fire dwindles for a moment, whereas in this *ode*, from its inception to its close, matter and manner are not only superbly blended, but every line carries its noble freight of beauty. The first stanza is a symphony of colour, the second a symphony of movement, the third a symphony of sound. The artist shapes the first and last, and in the midst the man, the thinker, gives us its human significance. Thus is the poem

perfected, its sensuous imagery enveloping as it were its vital idea.”—(A. Compton-Rickett).

### David Perkins on the *Ode To Autumn*

David Perkins, quoting another critic, says that this ode is regarded as “a very nearly perfect piece of style” but that it has “little to say”. However, says David Perkins, this ode is very “significant”. Even more than Keats’s other odes, *To Autumn* is “objective, oblique and impersonal, carried scarcely at all by direct statement that involves the poet.” Its expression, like that of the *Grecian Urn* or the *Nightingale*, is concrete and symbolic, and as in these other odes, the symbol adopted has been previously established in Keats’s poetry. Keats’s view of the seasons is on the whole rather conventional : spring is the time of budding, summer of fulfilment, and winter of death. Autumn, coming between summer and winter, can be seen as the intensifying and prolonging of summer. In other words, autumn suggests precisely that lengthening-out of fulfilment as its crest or climax which Keats had desired to find in the concrete world. So the poet, turning to the concrete, can contemplate it with serenity.

Autumn, accordingly, is described as a season of “mellow fruitfulness”. The sun is ripening or “maturing” the earth, “conspiring” to load the vines and bend the apple trees, “to swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells.” The season fills “all fruit with ripeness to the core”; and these images of full, inward ripeness and strain suggest that the maturing can go no further, that the fulfilment has reached its climax. Even the cells of the bees are over-brimmed. Yet the ripening continues, “budding more, and still more, later flowers”. The bees “think warm days will never cease”. Thus through the imagery the poem suggests a prolonging of fulfilment. At the same time, however, there are indirect images of ageing. For the sun is maturing—it is not only ripening the things, but it is also growing older. So also autumn itself, the “close-bosom friend” of the sun.

The second stanza picks up and continues imagery of arrested motion in the first. Autumn is here personified in a variety of attitudes ; but the dominant image is of autumn as the harvester—and a harvester that is in a sense another reaper, death itself. Instead of harvesting, however, autumn is motionless, death being momentarily held off as the ripening still continues. First autumn appears “sitting careless on a granary floor”. The granary is where the harvest would be stored, but autumn is not bringing in the grain. The assonance and alliteration of the line, “Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind”, leads into the image of autumn feeling drowsy or sleepy on a half-reaped furrow—again the harvest arrested. Finally autumn is seen near a cider-press where it watches “the last oozings hours by hours.” This is one of the two images suggesting activity, the other being the gleaner with laden head crossing a brook ; but the motion is so slow that the reader takes the cider-press almost as a repetition of the half-reaped furrow. But, of course, these are the last oozings, and the

harvest is drawing to a close. The notion of death is present, but it will emerge more emphatically in the third stanza.

Things reveal their essential identity most intensely at the moment of dying or readiness to die. So the last stanza begins with the one comment the poet offers in his own person. "Where are the songs of Spring?" but there is no rebellion in the answer: "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too". There follows an image of the day, which, like autumn, is about to end, and the death is accompanied by a fulfilment; for as it dies the day blooms all flowers ("While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day"). The stanza proceeds with images of death or withdrawal, and of song, and the songs are a funeral dirge for the dying year. At the same time, there is a tone of tenderness in the stanza; and the objectivity of the last few lines suggests an acceptance which includes even the fact of death. Death is here recognised as something inherent in the course of things, the condition and price of all fulfilment, having like the spring and summer of life its own distinctive character or "music" which is also to be prized and relished. In the last analysis, perhaps, the serenity and acceptance here expressed are aesthetic. The ode is, after all, a poem of contemplation. The symbol of autumn compels that attitude. The poet's own fears, ambitions and passions are not directly engaged, and hence he can be relatively withdrawn. The poet seems to suggest that life in all its stages has a certain identity and beauty which man can appreciate by disengaging his own ego. "Thus the symbol permits, and the poem as a whole expresses, an emotional reconciliation to the human experience of process."

#### **Robin Mayhead on the *Ode To Autumn***

Superficially altogether different from the *Ode On Melancholy*, *To Autumn* is deeply related to that poem. The *Melancholy* ode accepts the impermanence of beauty and joy as inevitable. In the *Ode To Autumn*, impermanence is again accepted, and accepted without the least trace of sadness because Keats is able to see it as part of a larger and richer permanence.

This greater permanence is the continuity of life itself, in which the impermanence of the individual human existence is one tiny aspect of a vast and deathless pattern. The rotation of the seasons offers a symbol of this continuity that is immediately satisfying. When Keats, in the last stanza, refers to the "music" of autumn, he is obviously pointing out the futility of regretting that spring has gone by. What is past is past. After all, autumn has its own characteristic sounds, which are as much part of the year as the songs of spring. Moreover, although autumn will be followed by the cold and barrenness of winter, winter will in turn give way to a fresh spring. Life goes on. The individual year may be drawing to a close, but there will be a new year to take its place. This is indirectly conveyed with wonderful effect in the concluding line of the ode; "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies". In one way the line gives a hint of the coming winter, for the swallows are gathering to migrate to

warmer climates. Yet we remember that migratory birds return when the cold weather ends, so that the very hint of their forthcoming departure carries with it a suggestion of their re-appearance when warm days come again.

The handling of verse-structure is here wonderfully resourceful. The use of the run-on line in the first stanza, for instance, is noteworthy. If "swell" and "plump" give the outward signs of fat richness, the stress on "sweet kernel", inevitable after the pause at the end of the previous line, vividly makes us think of the lusciousness within. And the imagined sweetness leads to even greater sweetness of the honey made by the bees. The loaded abundance is suggested by the heavy movement in the last line which describes the over-brimming of their cells. There is so much oozing sweetness here that the honey-combs are insufficient to hold it all.

As F. R. Leavis has shown (in *Revaluation*), Keats employs verse-structure in the last four lines of the second stanza to enact the very movement of the gleaner. Keats is here able to suggest the prudent hesitation of the man (or woman) carefully balancing his load before he crosses the brook. Again, the extreme slowness with which the drops of cider issue from the press is suggested by the line : "Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours."

There are various hints of death in the final stanza, but the idea of death is not treated with horror or resentment. The day is dying softly, the rosy "bloom" of sunset taking away from the stark bareness of the now fully-reaped corn-fields. And, in any case, the very reference to the close of the day, like the final line about the swallows, carries with it a suggestion of its opposite. Just as the swallows will come back next year, so another day will dawn, for the great movement of life goes on, however short the existence of the individual.

#### Walter Jackson Bate on the *Ode To Autumn*

*To Autumn* is one of the most nearly perfect poems in English. The different parts of the poem contribute directly to the whole, with nothing left dangling or independent. The *Ode To A Nightingale* is a less "perfect" though a greater poem.

The poet himself is completely absent from the poem ; there is no "I", no suggestion of the discursive language that we find in the other odes ; the poem is entirely concrete, and self-sufficient in and through its concreteness. There is also a successful union of the ideal (that is, of the heart's desire) and reality. What the heart really wants is being found (in the first stanza, fullness and completion, in the second, a prolonging of that fulfilment). Here at last is something of a genuine paradise, therefore. It even has its deity—a benevolent deity that wants not only to "load and bless", but also to "spare", to prolong, to "set budding more". And yet all this is put with concrete exactness and fidelity.

Each of the three stanzas concentrates on a dominant aspect of autumn. The theme of the first is ripeness, of growth now reaching its climax. Yet growth is still surprisingly going on. The second stanza depicts stillness, for now autumn is conceived as a reaper or harvester, but a harvester who is not harvesting. Movement begins only in the latter part of the stanza. Even then it is suggested only in the momentary glimpse of the gleaner crossing a brook; and autumn then stops again to watch the slow pressing of the apples into cider as the hours pass. There is a hint that the end is approaching: these are the "last oozings".

In the final stanza, the personified figure of autumn is replaced by concrete images of life, and of life unaffected by any thought of death :\* the gnats, the hedge-crickets, the redbreast. Moreover, it is life that can exist in much the same way at other times than autumn. Only two images are peculiar to the season—the "stubble-plains" and the "full-grown lambs". The mind is free to associate the wailful mourning of the gnats with a funeral dirge for the dying year, but the sound is no more confined to autumn alone than is the "soft-dying" of any day; and if the swallows are gathering, they are not necessarily gathering for migration.\*

## TO AUTUMN

## I

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness !  
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun ;  
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
     With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run ;  
 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
     And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core ;  
     To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
         With a sweet kernel ; to set budding more,  
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
 Until they think warm days will never cease,  
     For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

10

## II

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store ?  
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
     Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind ;  
 Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
     Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
         Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers ;  
 And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
     Steady thy laden head across a brook ;  
     Or by cider-press, with patient look,  
         Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours,

11

\*Notice the difference between the foregoing interpretation by Walter Jackson Bate and this interpretation.

## III

Where are the songs of Spring ? Ay, where are they ?

    Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,

    While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

    And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue ;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

    Among the river sallows, borne aloft

    Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies ;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;

    Hedge-crickets sing ; and now with treble soft

    The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft,

    And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

30

## 4. Explanations

## Stanza 1

*Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness*—Autumn is here described as the season during which there is lot of mist in the air and during which fruits come to maturity. *Close bosom-friend*—intimate collaborator. Autumn and the sun are here regarded as two collaborators who work together to bring about the ripening of fruits. In other words, the season of autumn helps the sun in the latter's function of bringing the fruits to maturity.

*Thatch-eves*—the projecting portions or edges of the roofs of thatched cottages. A thatched cottage is one the roof of which is covered with straw, reeds, etc.

*How to load and bless.....run*—This is a picture of the vines becoming loaded with grapes. The vines run round the edges of thatched roofs. It is the sun which brings the grapes to maturity. Autumn co-operates with the sun in this process. (*Eves*—eaves; projecting portions of roofs.)

*Gourd*—the word is here used in the sense of a pumpkin. *To swell the gourd*—the gourd becomes bigger and bigger during autumn. *To swell*—to enlarge. *Kernel*—the sweet substance inside the hazelnuts. *To set budding more, and still more, later flowers for the bees*—Certain varieties of flowers bloom in autumn. The bees suck the sweetness of these flowers in order to make honey. *O'er-brimmed*—filled to overflowing. *Clammy*—sticky. *Cells*—the small holes in a honey-comb.

**Explanation:** *Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.....their clammy cells.* (Stanza 1)—In this stanza, the poet has described the bounty of Autumn. Autumn is the season of mists. It is a season during which different kinds of fruit ripen and it seems that Autumn actively co-operates with the sun in bringing about the maturity of the fruits. Thus Autumn and the sun work together for the ripening of all kinds of fruit. The vines running round the edges of thatched roofs become loaded with grapes during Autumn. The branches of the apple-trees are bowed nearly to the ground with the weight of apples. The apple-trees growing in the cottage-gardens are

covered with moss and are weighed down with fruit. All fruit is filled with sweetness through and through. The gourd grows bigger and bigger. The hazel-nuts are filled with a sweet kernel. Certain flowers also bloom in autumn. The bees suck the sweetness of these flowers. To the bees, it seems that these flowers represent a continuation of summer. For the bees, therefore, the warm days of summer have not ended. The sticky cells of the honeycombs are filled to overflowing with honey, and yet Autumn provides more flowers in case the bees may like to draw more sweetness from them.

### *Stanza 2*

In this stanza, Autumn is seen in the figure of a woman performing different tasks associated with that season.

*Who hath not seen.....thy store?*—Autumn may often be seen in the fields in the midst of her treasures of corn which has been harvested. *The winnowing wind*—the wind which separates the chaff from the grains. It also means the wind which ruffles and parts the locks of a woman's hair.

(*To winnow*—to separate husk or chaff from grains.)

*The fume of poppies*—the heavy narcotic scent of poppies. The poppy is a flower from which opium is obtained. *Hook*—sickle. *Spares*—abstains from : does not reap or cut. *Swath*—a ridge or row of corn.

*Gleaner*—a person who collects the grains and ears of corn which have been left behind in the fields by the reapers. The gleaner collects the grains and then goes home with her head laden with the weight of the grains. *The last oozings*—the remnants of apple-juice falling drop by drop from the cider-press.

**Explanation :** *Who hath not seen thee.....hours by hours* (Stanza 2)—This stanza describes the occupations of Autumn. Autumn is here personified as a winnower, as a reaper, as a gleaner, and as a cider-presser. Autumn is here seen as a woman who performs the tasks of winnowing, reaping, gleaning, and cider-pressing. If anyone wants to see Autumn, he may go into the fields and he will see the women engaged in the winnowing operations, while the breeze ruffles their locks of hair. This is one picture of Autumn. Secondly, we may see Autumn in the shape of a reaper, who has been engaged in reaping corn but who in the course of her work is so overcome by the sleep-inducing smell of poppies that she falls asleep, with the result that the next row of corn remains unreaped. Thirdly, Autumn may be seen in the character of a gleaner who is walking along steadily with the weight of grains upon her head, crossing a stream. Finally, Autumn may be seen in the figure of a woman who is crushing the ripe apples in the wooden press to obtain their juice from which cider is to be made. This woman sits by the cider-press and watches patiently the apple-juice flowing out of the press, drop by drop.

**Note :** In this stanza, Autumn has been given a concrete shape and a concrete personality. Autumn is seen in four different guises, corresponding to the different occupations of this season..

*Stanza 3*

*Think not of them, thou hast thy music too*—Autumn is here contrasted with Spring. Spring is distinguished by its sweet songs of birds. Autumn does not possess those songs. But there is no need to feel any regret on that account.

*Barred clouds*—clouds looking like the bars of a grate; long-drawn-out clouds. *Bloom*—lend charm to.

*While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day*—This is a beautiful picture of the glow of sunset, with clouds having the shape of bars.

*Stubble plains*—fields from which the harvest has been reaped, leaving behind the stumps. *Wailful choir*—mournful collective singing. *Gnat*—a kind of flying insect. *River swallows*—willow trees of low-growing or shrubby kind, growing on the river-side.

*Borne aloft*—carried upward by the wind. *Sinking*—falling downwards.

*Bleat*—the cry of lambs. *Bourn*—boundary.

The phrase “hilly-bourn” means the hills that bound the view or the landscape.

*Hedge-crickets*—grasshoppers. *Treble soft*—a note of music sung at the loudest pitch. The note of the redbreast is at once high, bold, and delicate. *Croft*—field.

*Gathering swallows*—swallows gathering in large numbers (for winter migration). (The swallows migrate in large numbers to warm places when winter comes.)

**Where are the songs of Spring?.....twitter in the skies** (Stanza 3)—In this stanza, the poet describes the sounds of Autumn. Spring is distinguished by its songs. These sweet songs are not heard in autumn. But there is no need to feel any regret on that account. Autumn has its own peculiar music. The sounds of autumn are heard in the evenings. When the sun is setting, a soft glow irradiates the fields from which the crop has been reaped, leaving the stumps behind. The long-drawn-out clouds in the sky look like the bars of a grate. At this time, the melancholy buzzing of the gnats is heard. The gnats fly about among the shrubs growing on the river-side. The gnats are carried upwards when the wind is strong, and they come downwards when the wind is feeble. In addition to the gnats singing in a melancholy chorus, the bleating of full-grown lambs is heard from the hills which bound the landscape. Then there is the chirping of the grasshoppers. Next comes the high, bold and delicate singing of the redbreast which sings from an orchard. Finally, there is the twittering of the swallows which are gathering in large numbers to get ready for their winter migration.

The gnats mourn by the river; the lambs bleat on the hill; the grasshopper sings from the hedge; the redbreast whistles from the garden; and the swallows twitter in the sky. Such is the music of Autumn!

## VIII. ODE TO FANCY

### 1. Introduction

In this poem, Keats describes the pleasures which one can enjoy by means of the exercise of one's fancy or imagination. It is regarded as one of the most beautiful poems of Keats. It certainly possesses an outdoor, refreshing quality. The central idea that reality, however beautiful it may be, can never satisfy us fully and that true satisfaction can be found only in the pleasures of the imagination, is perfectly convincing. The poem shows the influence of Milton in its exquisite metrical harmony. There are echoes in it from Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*.

### 2. Critical Summary

The pleasures of reality, says the poet, melt away soon, but the pleasures of the imagination are ever-fresh and everlasting. We should, therefore, give free reins to our imagination. Pleasure is never to be found at home. If we let our fancy loose, it will bring for us from abroad all the pleasures that we wish to enjoy. (Lines 1—9)

Summer, spring, and autumn, all have their beauties. But these seasons can never give us real and lasting pleasure, because of the imperfections which all the pleasures of reality suffer from, and because of the feeling of weariness or disgust to which they all ultimately lead. The flowers and fruits of these different seasons soon fade ; and we soon tire of the pleasures which these seasons provide. (Lines 10—15)

The true season for pleasure, says the poet, is winter. (This is, of course, a paradoxical statement because winter in England is a season of great hardship and suffering. What the poet means is that in winter one can sit down in a cosy corner of the house and give free reins to one's fancy.) Sitting by the fireside on a wintry night, we can send our fancy on her travels, and we can enjoy all the beauties of summer, spring, and autumn. The buds and bells of May, and the heaped wealth of autumn, with all the delights of summer will be mingled together for us, and we can enjoy these as we might enjoy three excellent wines mingled in a cup. We can hear the distant harvest songs, the sweet birds welcoming the morning, and the rooks cawing and searching for sticks and straws. We can see in our imagination the flowers of different seasons, such as the daisy, the marigold, the lily, the primrose and the hyacinth. We can see the field-mouse and the snake emerging from their underground abode after their winter-long hibernation. We can see the nest-eggs being hatched ; we can see the swarm of bees ; we can hear the ripe acorns falling down to the ground. (Lines 16—66)

Only the pleasures of fancy are ever-fresh and everlasting. Pleasures of reality are lost as soon as they are enjoyed. The beauty of even the loveliest woman becomes stale if we see her every day. Her cheeks, her lips, her eyes, and her voice lose all their appeal and charm as a result of too much familiarity. But a beloved who has

been created by fancy will retain her beauty and charm always. It is better to have an imaginary sweetheart than to have a real woman as one's sweetheart. This imaginary sweetheart will have eyes as beautiful and sweet as Proserpina had before she was carried off by Pluto, the god of the underworld. This imaginary sweetheart will have a waist as beautiful as that of Hebe, the goddess of youth and the cup-bearer of the gods. (Lines 67—89)

Indeed, the pleasures of reality are as short-lived as the bubbles formed when rain is falling. We should, therefore, remove all restraints and restrictions upon our fancy. If fancy is allowed to roam and to soar freely, it will bring a multitude of pleasures. Let the winged fancy be given unlimited freedom to wander abroad, and we shall find that it has the capacity to provide us with those exquisite pleasures which cannot be found at home. (Lines 89—94)

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**The main idea :** The subject of this poem is the pleasures of the "fancy", which here means the "imagination". The pleasures of the imagination, says the poet, are ever-fresh and everlasting, while the pleasures of reality are short-lived. The pleasures of reality are lost as soon as they are enjoyed, but the pleasures of the imagination have the quality of permanence. The beauty of even the loveliest woman becomes stale and tiresome as a result of too much familiarity ; but the beauty of an imaginary sweet-heart can never fade or decline. This poem is typical of Keats's aesthetic temperament. It teaches us the value of the imagination in lending a permanent appeal and freshness to the pleasures of reality. One must observe the beautiful things in this world, and then one must use one's imagination to re-call those things and to create new things, and thus to enjoy their charm :

Ever let the Fancy roam,  
Pleasure never is at home.

**Sensuous quality :** The poem has a richly sensuous appeal. We have numerous pictures of beautiful things which please our senses. The fruits of autumn, buds and bells of May, the sweet singing of the birds, the various flowers—the daisy, the marigold, the lily, the primrose—are a kind of feast which we enjoy as we go through the poem. By the exercise of our fancy, we can see at one glance all the flowers :

Thou shalt, at one glance, behold  
The daisy and the marigold ;  
White-plumed lilies, and the first  
Hedge-grown primrose that hath burst ;  
Shaded hyacinth, alway  
Sapphire queen of the mid-May ;  
And every leaf, and every flower  
Pearled with the self-same shower.

Similarly, the sweet-heart whom the imagination has to create would be an embodiment of perfect beauty and would remind us of Proser-

pina of ancient mythology. This imaginary sweet-heart would have a waist and a side as white as Hebe's. We are here given a lovely picture of Hebe's petticoat slipping down to her feet, and Jove becoming "languid" with passion on beholding her naked physical charms. Even Jove seems to swoon with passion as Porphyro in *The Eve Of St. Agnes* does :

With a waist and with a side  
White as Hebe's, when her zone  
Slipt its golden clasp, and down  
Fell her kirtle to her feet,  
While she held the goblet sweet,  
And Jove grew languid.

The reference is to ancient mythology in the poem which brings before us the stories of Pluto's abduction of Proserpina, and of Jove's lustful desire for Hebe.

**Minute observation of Nature :** The poem shows not only Keats's love of Nature, but also his close and minute observation of everything that happens in the world of Nature. We have a vivid picture of the winter and of the other seasons. The pictures of the field-mouse, the snake, the eggs being hatched in the nests of birds, the ripe acorns falling down, and the rooks searching for sticks and straws, are examples of the poet's interest in even the small details of the life of Nature :

Or the rooks, with busy caw,  
Foraging for sticks and straw.

Thou shalt see, the field-mouse peep  
Meagre from its celled sleep ;  
And the snake, all winter-thin  
Cast on sunny bank its skin !  
Freckled nest eggs thou shalt see  
Hatching in the hawthorn-tree,  
When the hen-bird's wing doth rest  
Quiet on her mossy nest.....

These pictures fully illustrate Keats's preference for vivid and concrete imagery.

**Jubilation and melancholy :** The mood of the poem on the whole is one of jubilation and exultation, although a streak of melancholy runs through it. The feeling of melancholy is due to our realisation that, the sweet pleasures of reality melt away quickly ; while the feeling of jubilation is due to the fact that our imagination can more than compensate us for the transitoriness of real pleasures.

**Technical merits :** The poem is remarkable also because of its sweet music and harmony. There are some very appropriate similes and some felicitous phrases and expressions. The shortness

of the duration of the pleasures of reality is aptly compared to the melting of bubbles :

At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,  
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.

The imaginative combination of the pleasures of winter, summer and autumn is compared to the mixing of three wines in a cup which one can enjoy drinking :

She will mix these pleasures up  
Like three fit wines in a cup,  
And thou shalt quaff it :

An imaginary mistress may be as "dulcet-eyed as Ceres' daughter", while her waist and side may be "white as Hebe's". Then we have such metaphorical expressions as "the mesh of the Fancy's silken leash", and "Fancy's prison string". Among the felicitous phrases we have "Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage", "Fancy, high-commission'd", "all the heaped Autumn's wealth", "sweet birds antheming the morn", "white-plumed lilies", and "sapphire queen of the mid-May".

Speaking about this poem, a commentator says : "Light-hearted though it is, it suggests a first trying-over of material eventually woven into the Odes ; many suggestive images and actual phrases will be recognised ('all the heaped Autumn's wealth', 'mid-May', 'All the buds and bells of May'), and the theme of the poem contrasts the transience of natural beauty with the vision of unfading beauty called up by the poetic imagination."

#### TO FANCY

Ever let the Fancy roam,  
Pleasure never is at home :  
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,  
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth ;  
Then let winged Fancy wander  
Through the thought still spread beyond her :  
Open wide the mind's cage-door,  
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.  
O sweet Fancy ! let her loose ;  
Summer's joys are spoilt by use,  
And the enjoying of the Spring  
Fades as does its blossoming :  
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,  
Blushing through the mist and dew,  
Cloys with tasting : What do then ?  
Sit thee by the ingle, when  
The sear faggot blazes bright,  
Spirit of a winter's night ;  
When the soundless earth is muffled,  
And the caked snow is shuffled

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- From the ploughboy's heavy shoon ;  
When the Night doth meet the Noon  
In a dark conspiracy  
To banish Even from her sky.  
Sit thee there, and send abroad,  
With a mind self-overawed,  
Fancy, high-commission'd :—send her !  
She has vassals to attend her :  
She will bring, in spite of frost,  
Beauties that the earth hath lost ;  
She will bring thee, all together,  
All delights of summer weather ;  
All the buds and bells of May,  
From dewy sward or thorny spray ;  
All the heaped Autumn's wealth,  
With a still, mysterious stealth :  
She will mix these pleasures up  
Like three fit wines in a cup,  
And thou shalt quaff it :—thou shalt hear  
Distant harvest-carols clear ;  
Rustle of the reaped corn ;  
Sweet birds antheming the morn :  
And, in the same moment—hark !  
'Tis the early April lark,  
Or the rooks, with busy caw,  
Foraging for sticks and straw.  
Thou shalt, at one glance, behold  
The daisy and the marigold ;  
White-plumed lilies, and the first  
Hedge-grown primrose that hath burst :  
Shaded hyacinth, alway  
Sapphire queen of the mid-May ;  
And every leaf, and every flower  
Pearled with the self-same shower.  
Thou shalt see the field-mouse peep  
Meagre from its celled sleep ;  
And the snake, all winter-thin  
Cast on sunny bank its skin !  
Freckled nest eggs thou shalt see  
Hatching in the hawthorn-tree,  
When the hen-bird's wing doth rest  
Quiet on her mossy nest ;  
Then the hurry and alarm  
When the bee-hive casts its swarm ;  
Acorns ripe down-pattering  
While the autumn breezes sing.
- Oh, sweet Fancy ! let her loose ;  
Every thing is spoilt by use :  
Where's the cheek that doth not fade,  
Too much gazed at ? Where's the maid
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Whose lip mature is ever new ?  
 Where's the eye, however blue,  
 Doth not weary ? Where's the face  
 One would meet in every place ?  
 Where's the voice, however soft,  
 One would hear so very oft ?  
 At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth  
 Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.  
 Let, then, winged Fancy find  
 Thee a mistress to thy mind :  
 Dulcet-eyed as Ceres' daughter,  
 Ere the God of Törment taught her  
 How to frown and how to chide ;  
 With a waist and with a side  
 White as Hebe's, when her zone  
 Slipt its golden clasp, and down  
 Fell her kirtle to her feet,  
 White she held the goblet sweet,  
 And Jove grew languid.—Break the mesh  
 Of the Fancy's silken leash ;  
 Quickly break her prison-string,  
 And such joys as these she'll bring.—  
 Let the winged Fancy roam,  
 Pleasure never is at home.

75

80

85

90

#### 4. Explanations

**Explanation :** *O sweet Fancy !.....clogs with tasting* (Lines 9-15)—

The poet says that actual pleasures, as contrasted with imaginary pleasures, are short-lived and come to an end as soon as they are enjoyed. The pleasures of summer pass as soon as they have been experienced. The pleasures of spring are short-lived as are the flowers of spring. Autumn offers a rich variety of fully-ripened fruits. The red colour of these fruits makes us feel that the fruits are blushing through the mist and the dew-drops. These fruits are no doubt delicious. But as soon as we have eaten these fruits to our fill, we begin to have a feeling of over-satisfaction. Our desire for the fruits ends as soon as we have eaten the fruits.

**Explanation :** *What do then ?.....from her sky* (Lines 15-24)—What should then be done ? If all actual pleasures are short-lived, what is the remedy ? Let a man sit by the fireside when dry pieces of wood, which represent the spirit of wintry night, are burning brightly in the fireplace, and when the silent earth is covered with snow which is pushed away or shaken by the heavy shoes of the plough-boy. During this season of winter, the time of noon seems to give away directly to the darkness of night without allowing the twilight to intervene. It seems as if the night and noon have entered into a conspiracy not to allow the twilight or the evening to have its share of supremacy over the earth.

(During winter, there is hardly any twilight or evening in England. When the sun sets, it is immediately followed by the darkness of night. In other words, there is no evening or the semi-darkness of evening in England during winter. It would seem as if the day and night enter into a conspiracy to drive away the evening altogether. A geographical fact has here been given a human character. The night, the noon or the day, and the evening have been personified, and certain human powers have been attributed to them.)

**Note :** In Lines 25—42, the poet asks us to sit by the fireside and to give free reins to our fancy. Fancy will bring us all the pleasures and delights of different seasons so that it will be possible for us to enjoy the pleasures of different seasons at one and the same time.

*Fancy, high commission'd*—Fancy which has been deputed to perform a noble mission or task. *Vassals*—attendants. *Buds and bells of May*—buds and flowers which bloom in the month of May. “Bell” also means a bud because a bud is bell-shaped.

\* *Dewy*—dew-covered. *Sward*—grassy land. *Spray*—twig; shoot of a tree or plant.

*All the heaped Autumn's wealth*—All the rich treasures of autumn. Autumn is the season when the fruits ripen. The poet imagines heaps and heaps of ripe fruits lying before him.

**Explanation.** *Oh, sweet Fancy !.....hear so very oft ?* (Lines 67-76)—Fancy brings sweet pleasures, provided she is given free reins. We must enjoy all those pleasures which fancy can provide us. The pleasures of reality soon come to an end and lose their charm. No matter how beautiful a woman is, she will begin to tire us after some time, and her beauty will become stale. The rosy cheeks, the ripe lips, the blue eyes, the lovely features, the sweet voice, all these lose their charm and appeal after some time. But the beauty of an imagined woman is everlasting. Thus the pleasures of the imagination are superior to the pleasures of reality.

**Explanation.** *Let, then, winged Fancy find ....how to chide* (Lines 79-83)—It is better to have a beloved created by one's imagination. This imaginary beloved can have all the beauty and charm which Proserpina, the sweet-eyed daughter of Ceres, had before she was carried off to the underworld. Of course, Proserpina lost her original sweet nature when she found herself against her will in the dark underworld. In the underworld, where she was compelled to live by the cruelty and lust of Pluto, she could only frown and scold, but originally she had a very sweet disposition.

Proserpina was the daughter of Ceres, the goddess of the fruits of the earth. The god of torment is Pluto, the king of the underworld, who carried off Proserpina to his dark kingdom.

*With a waist and with a side.....and Jove grew languid* (Lines 84-89)—An imaginary beloved can have a waist and a side as white as Hebe's. Hebe was the cup-bearer of the gods on Mount Olympus. Hebe had a beautiful white complexion. When her girdle became loose because of the slipping of its golden clasp, her petticoat dropped to her feet just when she was offering a cup of wine to Jove, the supreme god. On beholding her naked beauty, Jove became almost faint with lust and passion.

These lines contain a voluptuous picture, and lend a touch of sensuality to the poem. Such lines are quite characteristic of Keats's poetic temperament.

*Break the mesh.....she'll bring* (Lines 89-92)—Fancy is here imagined as being held in check by means of a silken net in which she is entangled. The poet wants that fancy should not be held in check but that she should be given free reins. Let the strings holding fancy in check be broken quickly. When fancy is released and given free reins, she will bring to us joys such as the poet has described in the poem.

## IX. ODE TO POETS

(“*Bards of Passion and of Mirth*”)

### 1. Introduction

This poem was published in 1817. Keats wrote it on the blank page before *The Fair Maid Of The Inn*, a play written by Beaumont and Fletcher, two dramatists of the late Elizabethan period. Keats was deeply interested in the works of Elizabethan poets and playwrights. This poem seems, therefore, to be addressed to these two bards in particular. Beaumont and Fletcher were the twin stars of the later Elizabethan drama, their works being produced under James I. Among their other chief works are: *Philaster*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, *A King and No King*, and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*. Of this poem, Keats wrote: “It is on the double immortality of poets.” He called it a “rondeau”, a form of poetry in which, he thought, one idea could be amplified with greater ease and more delight and freedom than in the sonnet. As a matter of fact, the “rondeau” is an elaborate fixed form of verse with which this ode has nothing in common beyond the fact that it, like the “rondeau”, contains repetitions of certain lines.

### 2. Critical Summary

**Double immortality of dead poets :** Dead poets, says Keats, lead a double life. Poets, who die, leave their souls behind on earth in the form of their poetry. But their other souls live in heaven. The dead poets thus enjoy a two-fold immortality. On earth they live in their works : in heaven their souls enjoy all the heavenly pleasures.

**Their souls in heaven :** The souls of poets living in heaven hold communion with heavenly bodies like the sun and the moon, and they listen to the music of the spheres. They spend their time in luxurious comfort on Elysian fields where only the fawns of Diana can graze. There they enjoy the beauty of blue-bells, of daisies which have the fragrance of roses, and of roses which have a perfume not to be found on earth. There they listen to the nightingales singing songs which express divine truths and which are full of philosophic significance.

**What the works of dead poets teach us :** The souls of dead poets live on earth in their works. The earthly rousls (that is, the poems written by those poets) speak to us of the shortness of the life of human beings, and of the sorrows, delights, passions, hostilities, glory and shame of mankind. The works of dead poets tell us what strengthens our hearts and what weakens them. Their works teach us wisdom even though they themselves have gone to the distant regions of heaven. The wisdom they teach us will ultimately lead us to the place where their souls have gone after their death.

### 3. Critical Appreciation

**A tribute to poets :** This poem is addressed to all the dead poets in general, and to Beaumont and Fletcher in particular. The subject of the poem is the double immortality of dead poets. These poets, who in their poems dealt with passion and with mirth, may not be alive in the ordinary sense, but actually they now lead a double life. Their souls live in heaven, but their souls also live on earth in the shape of their poetic work. Keats here glorifies poets and poetry, and gives to them a very high place. He pays an eloquent tribute to all great poets who have ever lived on this earth. The idea of the poem is applicable to Keats himself as much as to other poets.

**Sensuous imagery :** The lines in which the pleasures of heavenly life are described have an exquisite sensuous charm. We are transported to a new world where the daisies possess the fragrance of roses and where the roses have a perfume not to be found on earth :

Where the daisies are rose-scented,  
And the rose herself has got  
Perfume which on earth is not :

The songs of nightingales in heaven are full of a philosophic significance and express divine truths in a melodious voice :

Where the nightingale doth sing  
Not a senseless, tranced thing,  
But divine melodious truth ;  
Philosophic numbers smooth ;  
Tales and golden histories  
Of heaven and its mysteries.

Only the fawns of Diana are allowed to graze in Elysian fields. Thus the description of heaven, though very brief, is an example of Keats's vivid, concrete, and rich imagery, combining a sensuous with a spiritual appeal.

**Picture of the life of mankind :** Apart from the sensuous description of the pleasures of heaven, the poem contains a picture, again very brief, of the kind of life that common people live on earth—their joys and sorrows, their angers and hostilities, their greatness and degradation :

Of their sorrows and delights ;  
Of their passions and their spites ;  
Of their glory and their shame ;  
What doth strengthen and what main.

**The moral function of poetry :** Keats in this poem gives us not a purely aesthetic conception of poetry but a philosophical one. Poetry, in his opinion, deals with all the vast diversity of human experience, and teaches us wisdom. Poetry speaks to mortals of their brief span of life, and deals with their sorrows, joys, passions, antagonisms, etc. The moral or didactic function of poetry is here recognised by Keats, although he himself was by no means a moral teacher. Keats adopts here a realistic approach to poetry, although he himself was largely an aesthetic and escapist poet. The view of poetry stated here is highly satisfying to us, and we respond to it whole-heartedly.

However, it may be pointed out that Keats's description of the heavenly life is purely fanciful and devoid of any realistic appeal. To enjoy this description, it is necessary to suspend our disbelief. This description has a great appeal to our imagination, not to our sense of reality. But the belief that the poetry of dead writers is a source of wisdom to us is certainly true and perfectly convincing.

**Simple and musical :** The poem is written in a simple and lucid style and possesses a melody and sweetness all its own. Verbal felicities are not absent from this poem although it belongs to Keats's earliest work. "Bards of passion and of mirth", "double-lived in regions new", "Elysian lawns brows'd by none but Dian's fawns", "never slumber'd, never cloying"—these phrases illustrate the point.

### ODE TO POETS

Bards of Passion and of Mirth,  
Ye have left your souls on earth !  
Have ye souls in heaven too,  
Double-lived in regions new ?  
Yes, and those of heaven commune  
With the spheres of sun and moon ;  
With the noise of fountains wondrous,  
And the parle of voices thund'rous ;

With the whisper of heaven's trees  
 And one another, in soft ease  
 Seated on Elysian lawns  
 Brows'd by none but Dian's fawns ;  
 Underneath large blue-bells tented,  
 Where the daisies are rose-scented,  
 And the rose herself has got  
 Perfume which on earth is not ;  
 Where the nightingale doth sing  
 Not a senseless, tranced thing,  
 But divine melodious truth ;  
 Philosophic numbers smooth ;  
 Tales and golden histories  
 Of heaven and its mysteries.

10.

Thus ye live on high, and then  
 On the earth ye live again ;  
 And the souls ye left behind you  
 Teach us, here, the way to find you,  
 Where your other souls are joying,  
 Never slumber'd, never cloying.  
 Here, your earth-born souls still speak  
 To mortals, of their little weck ;  
 Of their sorrows and delights ;  
 Of their passions and their spites ;  
 Of their glory and their shame ;  
 What doth strengthen and what maim.  
 Thus ye teach us, every day,  
 Wisdom, though fled far away.

30.

Bards of Passion and of Mirth,  
 Ye have left your souls on earth !  
 Ye have souls in heaven too,  
 Double-lived in regions new !

40.

#### 4. Explanations

*Bards of Passion and of Mirth*—tragic and comic poets ; poets who deal with the serious and intense feelings of mankind, and those who deal with the lighter feelings of human beings.

**Explanation :** *Bards of Passion.....in regions new?*  
 (Lines 1-4)—Addressing the tragic and comic poets, who have departed from this world, Keats says that they have left behind on earth their souls in the form of the poems which they wrote. The poetic work of those authors gives us a peep into their souls. At the same time, the souls of these poets live in heaven. Thus they live a double life ; one on earth in the form of their poems, and the other in heaven where they went after death.

*The spheres of sun and moon*—heavenly bodies like the sun and the moon.

*Parle*—speech. *Voice thund'rous*—loud, thunder-like voice. Keats is probably referring to the voice of God and of angels. Or, he may be referring to the voices of orators and poets who live in heaven.

*Elysian*—heavenly. *Brows'd by*—grazed by.

*Dian*—Diana, the goddess of the moon or the goddess of chastity and hunting. Her chariot was believed to be drawn by fawns.

**Explanation :** Yes, and those of heaven commune.....*Dian's fawns* (Lines 5-12)—Keats says that the souls of the departed poets live in heaven and are in constant communication with the spirits of the heavenly bodies like the sun and the moon. These souls live in heaven and enjoy the music of the spheres. They listen to the loud sounds of the wonderful heavenly fountains, and the loud voice of God or of the poets and orators dwelling there. These souls converse with one another in low whispers, and they listen to the whispering sounds made by the trees in heaven. They sit comfortably in the beautiful fields of heaven where only the fawns of Dians. are allowed to graze.

**Explanation :** Where the nightingale doth sing.....and its mysteries (Lines 15-20)—The song of the earthly nightingale is sung by it in a state of delirious ecstasy, and has, therefore, no meaning. The earthly nightingale sings senseless songs. But the nightingale in heaven sings songs which express divine truths in sweet notes of music. The nightingale there sings philosophic songs. Those songs reveal the secrets of heaven and of the saints and angels. In short, the songs of heavenly nightingales contain deep meanings and deep truths. The souls of poets living in heaven listen to those songs and greatly enjoy them.

*Tranced*—delirious ; ecstatic.

*Slumber'd*—sleeping. *Cloying*—over-satisfied to the point of disgust.

**Explanation :** Thus ye live on high.....never cloying (Lines 23-27)—The souls of the dead poets live in heaven, enjoying all the delights there. But the poets continue to live on the earth also in the shape of the poems they wrote. By reading their poems, we who still live on earth become acquainted with their minds and souls. In other words, the souls of the dead poets are revealed to us by their poems. Their poems also teach us the way in which we can see those poets as they live in heaven, happily and joyfully. Their souls, which live in heaven, are never overcome by laziness or sleep, nor do they experience a feeling of disgust which generally results from an excess of pleasure.

*Of their little weak*—of the short duration of human life.

*Spites*—grudges ; ill-will ; antagonisms.

*Maim—waken ; cripple.*

*Though fled far away—though gone to distant regions.*

**Explanation :** *Here, your earth-born souls still speak.....though fled far away.* (Lines 29-36)—The souls of the dead poets are revealed to us in the poems which they wrote. Those poets continue to speak to us through their poetry which deals with mankind and of the varied experiences of mankind. This poetry points out the shortness and the transitoriness of human life. It deals with the sorrows, joys, passions and hatreds of mankind. It describes the glorious deeds of human beings, and it describes the shameful or degraded side of human nature. It tells us what strengthens the human heart and what weakens it. In this way, those poets teach us knowledge and wisdom every day, although they have themselves departed from this world and are now living in heaven.

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## **X. ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER**

### **1. Introduction**

Chapman (1559-1634) was a dramatist of the Elizabethan Age. He became famous for his translation of Homer's *Iliad* from the original Greek into English. He also translated the *Odyssey*. Keats's imagination was fired by the story of Homer's *Iliad* as translated with great power by Chapman. So powerful was the attraction of Greek stories for Keats that it was said of him that he was born a Greek. This sonnet was written by Keats in the early stages of his poetic career and it gives expression to Keats's feelings of joy and wonder on reading Chapman's translation of Homer's great epic. The sonnet is a tribute to Chapman ; but more than that, it is a tribute to Homer's poetic genius.

### **2. Critical Summary**

Keats says that he had wandered through many golden realms of literature and studied the works of many great poets (like Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton), but he had merely heard about the ancient Greek poet, Homer. He had surely been acquainted with Homer's reputation as a great writer but he had not made any personal study of Homer's poetry. Then he came upon Chapman's English translation of Homer's great epic, the *Iliad*, and when he had gone through it he felt that he had visited an absolutely new domain of poetry. Having read this translation, he felt like an astronomer who sees through his telescope a new planet which was hitherto unknown. He felt like the Spanish explorer, Cortez, and his men who, on discovering the Pacific Ocean, must have been filled with a wondering expectation. The immense possibilities of the newly-discovered Pacific Ocean must have struck those explorers dumb with a feeling of amazement and of hope. Similar feelings filled Keats on his first introduction to Homer's poetry through Chapman's translation. In other words, Keats too felt an ecstatic joy and wonder.

### **3. Critical Appreciation**

**An expression of wonder and ecstasy :** This great sonnet is one of the early poetic compositions of the young Keats. His imagination was fired by the story of Homer's *Iliad* as translated with great power by the Elizabethan poet and dramatist, Chapman. The sonnet is the expression of the ecstatic joy and wonder at the opening out of a new, rich world of beauty and poetic experience to him.

**A tribute to Homer :** The poem is a glowing tribute to the poetic genius of Homer. Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are among the front-rank masterpieces of world literature. The impact they made on the youthful mind of Keats was powerful. But equally is this poem a tribute to Chapman's genius in having

rendered the Greek epics into English with conspicuous success. This sonnet is, indeed, a piece of literary appreciation in verse.

**Figurative style :** Keats's style is here marked by an abundance of striking metaphors and similes. The beautiful world of poetry is here called "the realms of gold" which is a rich and significant phrase. This metaphor is maintained throughout the poem with such expressions as "states and kingdoms", "western islands", and "the wide expanse ruled by Homer". There are two very effective similes in the last six lines through which the writer's feeling of wonder and his ecstatic joy are conveyed. The poet compares his state of mind with that of an astronomer who discovers a new planet in the sky. He then compares his state of mind with that of Cortez and his men when they discovered the Pacific Ocean. There could have been no more emphatic a manner of expressing the feelings of wonder and joy resulting from a study of Homer.

**Italian in form :** This sonnet follows the Italian or Petrarchan model and is therefore divisible into an octave (first eight lines) and a sestet (last six lines). Keats is reckoned among the great sonnet-writers in English even though he did not produce a large quantity of sonnets.

### ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S HOMER

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen ;  
 Round many western islands have I been  
 • Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne :  
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold :  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken ;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He stared at the Pacific—and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

10

#### 4. Explanations

**Explanation.** *Much have I travell'd.....to Apollo* .....to Apollo  
 1.4)—In these lines literature is compared to countries, states and kingdoms ; and literature is also metaphorically described as "the realms of gold". Just as a traveller visits various countries and kingdoms, Keats has read the writings of many great authors like Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Keats says that he has visited many western islands ruled by poets under the sovereignty of Apollo, the god of poetry. He means that poets compose their poems under the inspiration which they derive from Apollo and that he has read the compositions of many inspired poets of England and Ital

(*Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold*—those islands which poets rule under the sovereignty of Apollo. *Fealty*—loyalty.)

**Explanation.** *Oft of one wide expanse.....loud and bold* (Lines 5-8)—After having said that he has been to many golden realms of poetry, Keats goes on to say that he had often heard of one vast territory governed by the Greek poet, Homer. Homer, he says, had a high forehead which is a sign of intellectual greatness. But though Keats had heard of Homer's fame as a poet, he had never read Homer's poetry till he came upon Chapman's English translation of Homer's work. He had travelled a lot over various kingdoms, but he had never breathed the clear, pure air of Homer's kingdom till he was taken there by the guiding hand of Chapman. Chapman it was through whom Keats made an acquaintance with Homer's great epic poetry.

(*Deep-brow'd Homer*—Homer with his deep brow or high forehead which is regarded as a sign of intellectual greatness. Homer was the Greek poet who wrote the famous epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There is doubt as to both his birthplace and his date, the latter being variously placed between 1050 and 850 B.C. Tradition represents him as blind and poor in his old age.

*Demesne*—domain ; kingdom. *Serene*—This word is here used as a noun meaning “clear air”)

**Explanation :** *Then felt I.....a peak in Darien* (Lines 9-14) —These lines describe Keats's reaction on reading Chapman's English translation of the Greek works of Homer. Through Chapman, Keats was introduced to a new realm of gold of which he had only heard before. His study of Homer's poetry as translated by Chapman was a new and strange experience for him. His feelings could be compared to those of an astronomer who is gazing at the sky through his telescope and who suddenly sees a new planet move into the circle of his vision, a planet which had never been seen before. The discovery of a new planet would fill that astronomer with wonder and surprise and a sense of mystery. Or, Keats's feelings on reading Homer might be compared to the feelings of the early Spanish explorer Cortez and his comrades. When Cortez discovered the Pacific Ocean, his sharp eyes stared at it with great wonder, and all his sailors, too, filled with a wondering expectation, looked silently at one another and at a peak on the Isthmus of Darien (which is continuous with the Isthmus of Panama). Those explorers were filled with so much wonder and expectation that they could not utter their feelings. The vast possibilities of the newly-discovered Pacific Ocean struck them dumb with astonishment. That is how Keats also felt on his first introduction to Homer's poetry through Chapman's translation

**Note :** Actually it was an explorer called Balboa, and not Cortez, who discovered the Pacific Ocean. Cortez was the conqueror

of Mexico, but he was wrongly believed to be the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean. However, the main thing in the poem is Keats's imaginative use of the episode of the discovery of the Pacific Ocean.

*Watcher of the skies*—astronomer. *Swims into his ken*—gradually moves into the circle of vision of his telescope. "Ken" properly means knowledge, but it is here used to mean sight. *Stout Cortez*—Cortez who was brave and strong. *Eagle eyes*—eyes as sharp and keen as those of an eagle.

*Surmise*—Actually this word means "guess". Here it is used to mean wondering expectation.

*Darien*—the Isthmus of Darien, continuous with the better known Isthmus of Panama which connects North America and South America. An Isthmus is a narrow neck of land which connects two larger portions.

# 16

## *The Lesser Odes of Keats*

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1. *Ode to Apollo.*
2. *Hymn to Apollo.*
3. *To Pan.*
4. *To Neptune.*
5. *To Sorrow.*
6. *To Diana.*
7. *On a Lock of Milton's Hair.*
8. *To Maia.*
9. *On the Mermaid Tavern.*
10. *To Fanny.*

The odes mentioned above and dealt with below are among the minor poems of Keats even though two of these (*To Pan* and *To Sorrow*) deserve high praise. These odes are chiefly noteworthy by virtue of their concrete and sensuous imagery, their vivid descriptions, their mythological allusions, their occasional felicity of word and phrase, their musical quality, and their imaginative and lyrical character. But they do not have the stamp of great poetry, except perhaps the *Ode to Sorrow*. With the exception of the *Ode to Sorrow*, *To Fanny* and *On a Lock of Milton's Hair*, they are poems of escape. Even the *Ode to Sorrow* has its escapist element in the description of Bacchus and his rout. There is no depth of thought in these poems. In fact they suffer from a lack of "substance". The poet does not have much to say in them. He is merely indulging his fancies here. The major odes (which have been dealt with in considerable detail in an earlier chapter) show a vast improvement upon these poems.

### 1. ODE TO APOLLO

In thy western halls of gold,  
When thou sittest in thy state,  
Bards, that erst sublimely told  
Heroic deeds, and sang of fate,

- With fervour seize their adamantine lyres,  
Whose chords are solid rays, and twinkle radiant fires. 5
- Here Homer with his nervous arms  
Strikes the twanging harp of war,  
And even the western splendour warms,  
While the trumpets sound afar : 10  
But, what creates the most intense surprise,  
His soul looks out through renovated eyes.
- Then, through thy Temple wide, melodious swells  
The sweet majestic tone of Maro's lyre :  
The soul delighted on each accent dwells,—  
Enraptured dwells,—not daring to respire,  
The while he tells of grief around a funeral pyre. 15
- 'Tis awful silence then again ;  
Expectant stand the spheres ;  
Breathless the laurell'd peers, 20  
Nor move, till ends the lofty strain,  
Nor move till Milton's tuneful thunders cease,  
And leave once more the ravish'd heavens in peace.
- Thou biddest Shakespeare wave his hand,  
And quickly forward spring  
The Passions—a terrific band—  
And each vibrates the string  
That with its tyrant temper best accords,  
While from their Master's lips pour forth the inspiring words. 25
- A silver trumpet Spenser blows,  
And, as its martial notes to silence flee,  
From a virgin chorus flows  
A hymn in praise of spotless Chastity.  
'Tis still ! Wild warblings from the Aeolian lyre  
Enchantment softly breathe, and tremblingly expire. 30 35
- Next thy Tasso's ardent numbers  
Float along the pleased air,  
Calling youth from idle slumbers,  
Rousing them from Pleasure's lair :—  
Then o'er the strings his fingers gently move,  
And melt the soul to pity and to love. • —
- But when *Thou* joinest with the Nine,  
And all the powers of song combine,  
We listen here on earth :  
The dying tones that fill the air,  
And charm the ear of evening fair,  
From thee, great God of Bards, receive their heavenly birth. 45

This ode was written by Keats when he was about twenty years old. It was written in praise of Apollo, the god of light, who also presided over music and therefore over poetry. Apollo is here imagined as sitting in state in his "western halls of gold" and listening to some of the great poets playing on the lyre of poetry. The first poet mentioned is Homer who sings of the heroism and glory of war and who has been blessed with the gift of eyesight\* in heaven. On hearing the war chant of Homer, Apollo's sun-palace becomes fiery-red. Next comes Virgil,\*\* with his sweet majestic tone, singing of the love of Dido, Queen of Carthage, for Aeneas and her burning herself on a funeral pyre when her lover deserted her. Virgil is followed by Milton whose tuneful thunders\*\*\* create a profound effect on the listeners. Next is the turn of Shakespeare whose performance calls forth a whole multitude of human passions. Then Spenser blows his silver trumpet with its sweet notes. Spenser sings a hymn in praise of feminine chastity † Next comes Tasso whose songs deal with a theme of high devotion and gallantry, namely the First Crusade and who deals also with certain love-stories‡ to lighten his heroic subject. But when Apollo himself begins to play on his lyre, and is supported by the Nine Muses, we human beings listen to that heavenly music spell-bound. Apollo's music surpasses in beauty the music of all the great bards.

This ode shows little originality. It is obviously written under the influence of Dryden and Gray. This influence shows itself in the various classical allusions, in the use of "stilted" poetic diction and artificial "conceits" and the frequent personifications. However, the poem is noteworthy because of the tributes it pays to Keats's Elizabethan masters, and the obvious sincerity which prompts these tributes.

## 2. HYMN TO APOLLO

God of the golden bow,  
     And of the golden lyre,  
     And of the golden hair,  
         And of the golden fire,  
             Charioteer  
                 Round the patient year,  
             Where—where slept thine ire,

\*Homer was blind. Keats imagines that the gift of eyesight was bestowed upon Homer in heaven. Homer "strikes the twanging harp of war" (line 8) because his epic poem, *The Iliad*, deals with the war of Troy.

\*\*Publius Virgil Maro, a Roman poet who wrote the *Aeneid* in which occurs the incident of Dido burning herself.

\*\*\*in *Paradise Lost*.

†in his *Faerie Queen*.

‡Tasso, an Italian poet, was the author of the *Jerusalem Delivered* in which occur references to the love-stories of Erminia and Tancred and of Rinaldo and Armida.

When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,  
 Thy laurel, thy glory,  
 The light of thy story,  
 Or was I a worm—too low creeping for death ?  
 O Delphic Apollo !

10

The Thunderer grasp'd and grasp'd,

The Thunderer frown'd and frown'd ;

The eagle's feathery mane

15.

For wrath became stiffen'd—the sound

Of breeding thunder

Went drowsily under,

Muttering to be unbound.

O why didst thou pity, and beg for a worm ?

20

Why touch thy soft lute

Till the thunder was mute,

Why was I not crush'd—such a pitiful germ ?

O Delphic Apollo !

The Pleiades were up,

25

Watching the silent air ;

The seeds and roots in Earth

Were swelling for summer fare ;

The Ocean, its neighbour,

Was at his old labour,

When, who—who did dare

30.

To tie for a moment thy plant round his brow,

And grin and look proudly,

And blaspheme so loudly,

And live for that honour, to stoop to thee now ?

35

O Delphic Apollo !

This poem was written at almost the same time as the *Ode To Apollo* and shows the same weaknesses as that piece of composition. However, Keats's handling of the metre in this poem is more successful than in the *Ode to Apollo*. This poem gives expression to Keats's feeling of remorse for an act of arrogance of which he thought himself guilty. It is believed that on one occasion Keats placed a wreath of laurel\* on his own forehead, an act which amounted to his making a claim that he was a great poet. Subsequently, being essentially a modest man, he felt sorry to have indulged in this juvenile act of presumption and wrote this poem to give expression to his feelings.

In the first four lines, Apollo is addressed as the archer-god, as the god of music, as a god having long golden hair, as the god of sunlight and as driving the chariot of the sun. Recalling his act in

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\*In olden times poets were honoured by being crowned with leaves of laurel.

putting a wreath of laurel on his own forehead, he asks Delphic\* Apollo why he was not appropriately punished for his arrogance. The great Jove had indeed got ready to punish Keats with his thunderbolt, but Apollo pleaded on Keats's behalf and obtained him the forgiveness of Jove. Keats says that a worm like him did not deserve this leniency. The constellation of Pleiades had risen ; it was summer time when seeds in the earth had begun to sprout ; the ocean was engaged in its ancient labours. It was at such a time that Keats dared to tie for a moment the wreath of laurel round his brow and thus make the proud claim of being a great poet. For that blasphemous act he now bends before Apollo to show his repentance. (Keats means that by his arrogant claim he must have offended Apollo who alone can decide whether a poet is great or not. He must now appease Apollo for his misconceived action, even though Apollo is not really offended with him, having already taken a lenient view of his action and having interceded with Jove on his behalf.)

There is nothing remarkable in this poem except its rich music. The concrete imagery, characteristic of all Keats's poetry, great or small, is already to be met with in this early poem as in the *Ode To Apollo*. This imagery includes the successive pictures of Apollo in the opening lines, the picture of Jove ("the Thunderer") and his favourite eagle in the second stanza, and of the Pleiades, the seeds and roots "swelling" under the surface of the earth, and the ocean engaged in its ancient labours in the final stanza.

### 3. TO PAN

"O thou, whose mighty palace roof doth hang  
From jagged trunks, and overshadoweth  
Eternal whispers, glooms, the birth, life, death  
Of unseen flowers in heavy peacefulness ;  
Who lovest to see the hamadryads dress  
Their ruffled locks where meeting hazels darken ;  
And through whole solemn hours dost sit, and hearken  
The dreary melody of bedded reeds,  
In desolate places, where dank moisture breeds  
The pipy hemlock to strange overgrowth—  
Bethinking thee, how melancholy loth  
Thou wast to lose fair Syrinx—do thou now,  
By thy love's milky brow !  
By all the trembling mazes that she ran,  
Hear us, great Pan !

10

"O thou, for whose soul-soothing quiet, turtles  
Passion their voices cooingly 'mong myrtles,  
What time thou wanderest at eventide  
Through sunny meadows, that outskirt the side

\* *Delphic*—In the temple at Delphi was Apollo's oracle. Hence "Delphic Apollo."

•Of thine enmossed realms : O thou, to whom  
Broad-leaved fig-trees even now foredoom  
Their ripen'd fruitage ; yellow-girted bees  
Their golden honeycombs ; our village leas  
Their fairest-blossom'd beans and poppied corn ;  
The chuckling linnet its five young unborn,  
To sing for thee ; low-creeping strawberries  
Their summer coolness ; pent-up butterflies  
Their freckled wings ; yea, the fresh-budding year  
All its completions—be quickly near,  
By every wind that nods the mountain pine,  
O forester divine !

“Thou, to whom every faun and satyr flies  
For willing service ; whether to surprise  
The squatted hare while in half-sleeping fit ;  
Or upward ragged precipices fit  
To save poor lambkins from the eagle's maw ;  
Or by mysterious enticement draw  
Bewilder'd shepherds to their path again ;  
Or to tread breathless round the frothy main,  
And gather up all fancifullest shells  
For thee to tumble into Naiads' cells,  
And, being hidden, laugh at their out-peeping ;  
Or to delight thee with fantastic leaping,  
The while they pelt each other on the crown  
With silvery oak-apples, and fir-cones brown—  
By all the echoes that about thee ring,  
Hear us, O satyr kin

“O Hearkener to the loud-clapping shears,  
While ever and anon to his shorn peers  
A ram goes bleating : Winder of the horn,  
When snouted wild-boars routing tender corn  
Anger our huntsmen : Breather round our farms,  
To keep off mildews, and all weather harms :  
Strange ministrant of undescribed sounds,  
That come a-swooning over hollow grounds,  
And wither drearily on barren moors :  
Dread opener of the mysterious doors  
Leading to universal knowledge—see,  
Great son of Dryope,  
The many that are come to pay their vows  
With leaves about their brows !

“Be still the unimaginable lodge  
For solitary thinkings ; such as dodge  
Conception to the very bourne of heaven,  
Then leave the naked brain : be still the leave  
That, spreading in this dull and clodded earth,  
Gives it a touch ethereal—a new birth :

Be still a symbol of immensity ;  
 A firmament reflected in a sea ;  
 An element filling the space between ;  
 An unknown—but no more : we humbly screen  
 With uplift hands our foreheads, lowly bending,  
 And, giving out a shout most heaven-rending,  
 Conjure thee to receive our humble Paean  
 Upon thy Mount Lycean !”

70

75

This ode is an extract from *Endymion* (Book I). *Endymion* opens with the account of a great feast held in honour of Pan.\* Endymion himself is present at the feast as prince and chief among the shepherds of Latmos. The *Ode To Pan* is the song sung on this occasion by the shepherds, while the priest offers the sacrifice to the god. “This ode is at once a thanksgiving for the bounties of a fruitful spring and a prayer to the god to continue his favours.”

In stanza I (Lines 1-15), Pan is described as living in a mighty palace made of trees in the forest and as watching with interest the tree-nymphs dressing their ruffled hair. The god sits for hours and hours, listening to the monotonous music of the reeds and recalling his luckless adventure with Syrinx, the Arcadian nymph, whose love for him could not be fulfilled.†

In stanza II (Lines 16-31), Pan is described as the protector of birds and insects, and of fruits and flowers. The turtle-doves sing to him in their passionate voices. The broad-leaved fig trees offer their ripe fruit to him as a sacrifice, while the bees offer their honeycombs to him. The fields offer their beans and corn to the god; the linnet offers its unborn young to sing for him; strawberries offer their summer coolness to him; and butterflies offer their freckled wings. Pan is addressed here as “forester divine”.

In stanzas III and IV (Lines 32-61), Pan is described as looking after animals and after the mythical denizens of the woods and waters—Fauns, Satyrs, and Naiads. Fauns and Satyrs are very prompt in offering their services to Pan. At the wish of Pan, the Fauns and Satyrs protect the lives of hares and of young lambs. They save shepherds from going astray and getting lost. They gather beautiful shells and throw them into the cells of the Naiads in order to enjoy the fun of it.

Pan listens to the loud sounds of the shears when the shepherds are removing the fleece from the bodies of sheep. Pan is the winder of the horn. He protects the farms from every kind of blight and from unseasonable frost, rain or sun. He opens the doors to universal knowledge. He is the great son of Mercury and Dryope.

\*Pan was the Greek god of shepherds and of everything connected with pastoral life... .

†Pan pursued this nymph but, before he could seize her, she was changed into a reed. .

Pan is the inspiring deity of thoughts that go deeper than pure reason can follow. His spirit works in the world as yeast in bread, moving men's imagination to wonder and to novel ideas. He is the fountain-head of musings, such as come to those who wander alone in lonely places. He is a symbol of immensity and of the heavenly firmament. He is the principle of all things, and he is the universal spirit. The singers of this hymn appeal to Pan to receive their humble offering in the form of this song. It is obvious that in this part of the poem (Lines 57-75) Keats expresses a mystical view of Pan, even though his poetic power is not mature enough to express the idea fully.

Wordsworth called this poem "a very pretty piece of paganism". The similarity between the attitude of Keats towards the pagan gods and that of Wordsworth (in his sonnet "The World is too much with us") is noteworthy. Apart from Keats's elaborate portrayal of the characteristics and functions of Pan in this poem, what is remarkable here is the poet's concrete and sensuous imagery. The tree-nymphs dressing their ruffled hair, the milky brow of the fair Syrinx, the ripened fruitage of fig-trees, the golden honeycombs, the low-creeping strawberries etc., are all sensuous pictures vividly depicted. Equally vivid is the description of the services rendered willingly by the fauns and satyrs. The closing lines of the poem are, no doubt, somewhat abstract because of the mystical view expressed there, but otherwise the poem consists of a long succession of concrete pictures. Keats's pictorial quality finds, indeed, a striking expression here.

The poem has received high praise from critics. It is believed to be the most beautiful of the four odes that occur in *Endymion*. Sidney Colvin points out that the poem is remarkable for its quality of direct Nature-interpretation, and goes on to say : "Not less excellent is the realisation of the true spirit of ancient pastoral life and worship". The poem, according to him, expresses perfectly the meaning of the Greek myth, and enriches it "with touches of northern feelings that are foreign to, and yet most harmonious with, the original". Keats's imagination in the writing of this ode is fed from the living sources of Nature.

#### 4. TO NEPTUNE

"King of the stormy sea !

Brother of Jove, and co-inheritor  
Of elements ! Eternally before  
Thee the waves awful bow. Fast, stubborn rock,  
At thy fear'd trident shrinking, doth unlock  
Its deep foundations, hissing into foam.  
All mountain-rivers, lost in the wide home  
Of thy capacious bosom, ever flow.  
Thou frownest, and old Aeolus thy foe  
Skulks to his cavern, 'mid the gruff complaint  
Of all his rebel tempests. Dark clouds faint

When, from thy diadem, a silver gleam  
 Slants over blue dominion. Thy bright team  
 Gulfs in the morning light, and scuds along  
 To bring thee nearer to that golden song  
 Apollo singeth, while his chariot                          15.  
 Waits at the doors of heaven. Thou art not  
 For scenes like this : an empire stern hast thou ;  
 And it hath furrow'd that large front : yet now,  
 As newly come of heaven, dost thou sit  
 To blend and interknit                                  20.  
 Subdued majesty with this glad time.  
 O shell-borne King sublime !  
 We lay our hearts before thee evermore—  
 We sing, and we adore !

“Breathe softly, flutes ;                          25  
 Be tender of your strings, ye soothing lutes ;  
 Nor be the trumpet heard ! O vain, O vain !  
 Nor flowers budding in an April rain,  
 Nor breath of sleeping dove, nor river's flow—  
 No, nor the Aeolian twang of Love's own blow  
 Can mingle music fit for the soft ear  
 Of goddess Cytherea !  
 Yet deign, white Queen of Beauty, thy fair eyes  
 On our souls' sacrifice.

“Bright-winged Child !  
 Who has another care when thou has smiled ?                  35.  
 Unfortunates on earth, we see at last                  ||  
 All death-shadows, and glooms that overcast  
 Our spirits, fann'd away by thy light pinions.  
 O sweetest essence ! sweetest of all minions !  
 God of warm pulses, and dishevell'd hair,                  40.  
 And panting bosoms bare !  
 Dear unseen light in darkness ! eclipser  
 Of light in light ! delicious poisoner !  
 Thy venom'd goblet will we quaff until  
 We fill—we fill !                                  --  
 And by thy Mother's lips—”

The *Hymn To Neptune* occurs in Book III of *Endymion*. It is sung in honour of Neptune, the god of the sea, by the many lovers who lay drowned but were brought back to life by Endymion. Neptune is addressed as the “king of the stormy sea,” and the co-inheritor (with his brothers Jove and Pluto) of the universe. The awful waves of the sea perpetually bow before Neptune. The stubborn rocks shake to their foundations at the threat of Neptune’s trident.\* All rivers flow from the mountains into the sea where they

\*Trident—the three-pronged weapon wielded by Neptune.

lose their individual identities. At Neptune's frown, Aeolus, the god of winds and storms, retreats fearfully to his caverns. Dark clouds dissolve when silvery rays gleam from Neptune's crown. Neptune drives his car through the hollow gulfs in the waves of the sea and listens to Apollo's songs. Neptune rules a stern empire, the empire of the sea, and therefore does not relish scenes of calm and rejoicing. On the present occasion however, Neptune has departed from his usual practice and has come to add solemnity to the joy of the lovers who are singing this song.

The singers then go on to invoke Venus, the goddess of love and beauty. They would like the flutes and the lutes to produce soft strains of music for the tender ears of Venus, though it is very unlikely that delicate music fit for her soft ears can really be produced.

Next follows the invocation to Cupid, the son of Venus and the god of love. Fortunate is the man on whom Cupid smiles. Those who are singing this song could not attain the fulfilment of their love when they lived on the earth. But the presence of Cupid on this occasion drives away their sense of disappointment and their dejection. Cupid is the god who is responsible for the quickened throbbing of the hearts of lovers, for the distracted look which appears on their faces, and for the excitement and agitation experienced by them. The poison of love which Cupid offers to human beings is delicious and has a bitter-sweet quality.

The poem, like the other extracts from *Endymion*, is remarkable for the vividness of its description. The awful power and majesty of Neptune are forcefully and effectively conveyed to us. Keats's felicity of phrase is also to be noted, especially in the lines where he tells us that neither "flowers budding in an April rain, nor breath of sleeping dove, nor river's flow, nor the Aeolian twang of Love's own bow" can produce music fit for the soft ear of Venus. The invocation to Cupid also shows a similar felicity of phrase, especially when Cupid is described as the "god of warm pulses, and dishevell'd hair, and panting bosoms bare!"

## 5. TO SORROW

O Sorrow !

Why dost borrow

The natural hue of health, from vermeil lips ?—

To give maiden blushes

To the white rose bushes ?

Or is it thy dewy hand the daisy tips ?

O Sorrow !

Why dost borrow

The lustrous passion from a falcon-eye ?—

To give the glow-worm light ?

Or, on a moonless night,

To tinge, on syren shores, the salt sea-spray ?

- O Sorrow !  
 Why dost borrow  
 The mellow ditties from a mourning tongue ?— 15  
 To give at evening pale  
 Unto the nightingale,  
 That thou mayst listen the cold dews among ?
- O Sorrow !  
 Why dost borrow 20  
 Heart's lightness from the merriment of May ?  
 A lover would not tread  
 A cowslip on the head,  
 Though he should dance from eve till peep of day—  
 Nor any drooping flower 25  
 Held sacred for thy bower,  
 Wherever he may sport himself and play.
- To Sorrow  
 I bade good morrow,  
 And thought to leave her far away behind. 30  
 But cheerly, cheerly,  
 She loves me dearly ;  
 She is so constant to me, and so kind :  
 I would deceive her,  
 And so leave her, 35  
 But ah ! she is so constant and so kind.
- Beneath my palm-trees, by the river side,  
 I sat a-weeping : in the whole world wide  
 There was no one to ask me why I wept—  
 And so I kept 40  
 Brimming the water-lily cups with tears  
 Cold as my fears.
- Beneath my palm-trees, by the river side,  
 I sat a-weeping : what enamour'd bride,  
 Cheated by shadowy wooer from the clouds, 45  
 But hides and shrouds  
 Beneath dark palm-trees by a river side ?  
 And, as I sat, over the light blue hills  
 There came a noise of revellers : the rills  
 Into the wide stream came of purple hue— 50  
 'Twas Bacchus and his crew !  
 The earnest trumpet spake, and silver thrills  
 From kissing cymbals made a merry din—  
 'Twas Bacchus and his kin !
- Like to a moving vintage down they came, 55  
 Crown'd with green leaves, and faces all on flame ;  
 All madly dancing through the pleasant valley,  
 ... To scare thee, Melancholy !

O then, O then, thou wast a simple name !  
 And I forgot thee, as the berried holly  
 By shepherds is forgotten, when in June  
 Tall chestnuts keep away the sun and moon :—  
 I rush'd into the folly !

• Within his car, aloft, young Bacchus stood,  
 Trifling his ivy-dart, in dancing mood,      60  
 With sidelong laughing ;  
 And little rills of crimson wine imbruued  
 His plump white arms, and shoulders, enough white  
 For Venus' pearly bite ;  
 And near him rode Silenus on his ass,      70  
 Pelted with flowers as he on did pass  
 Tipsily quaffing.

Whence came ye, merry Damsels ! whence came ye,  
 So many, and so many, and such glee ?  
 Why have ye left your bowers desolate      75  
 Your lutes, and gentler fate ?  
 "We follow Bacchus ! Bacchus on the wing,  
 A-conquering !  
 Bacchus, young Bacchus ! good or ill betide,  
 We dance before him thorough kingdoms wide :—      80  
 Come hither, lady fair, and joined be  
 To our wild minstrelsy !"

Whence came ye, jolly Satyrs ! whence came ye,  
 So many, and so many, and such glee ?  
 Why have ye left your forest haunts, why left      85  
 Your nuts in oak-tree cleft ?—  
 "For wine, for wine we left our kernel tree ;  
 For wine we left our heath, and yellow brooms,  
 And cold mushrooms ;  
 For wine we follow Bacchus through the earth ;      90  
 Great god of breathless cups and chirping mirth !  
 Come hither; lady fair, and joined be  
 To our mad minstrelsy !"

Over wide streams and mountains great we went,  
 And, save when Bacchus kept his ivy tent,      95  
 Onward the tiger and the leopard pants,  
 With Asian elephants :  
 Onward these myriads—with song and dance,  
 With zebras striped, and sleek Arabians' prance,  
 Web-footed alligators, crocodiles,      100  
 Bearing upon their scaly backs, in files,  
 Lump infant laughers mimicking the coil  
 Of seamen, and stout galley-rowers' toil :  
 With toying oars and silken sails they glide,  
 Nor care for wind and tide.      105

Mounted on panthers' furs and lions' manes,  
 From rear to van they scour about the plains ;  
 A three days' journey in a moment done ;  
 And always, at the rising of the sun,  
 About the wilds they hunt with spear and horn,  
 On spleenful unicorn.

110

I saw Osirian Egypt kneel adown  
 Before the vine-wreath crown !  
 I saw parch'd Abyssinia rouse and sing  
 To the silver cymbals' ring !  
 I saw the whelming vintage hotly pierce  
 Old Tartary the fierce !  
 The kings of Ind their jewel-sceptres vail,  
 And from their treasures scatter pearled hail ;  
 Great Brahma from his mystic heaven groans,  
 And all his priesthood moans,  
 Before young Bacchus' eye-wink turning pale.  
 Into these regions came I, following him,  
 Sick-hearted, weary—so I took a whim  
 To stray away into these forests drear,  
 Alone, without a peer :  
 And I have told thee all thou mayest hear.

120

125

Young stranger !  
 I've been a ranger  
 In search of pleasure throughout every clime ;  
 Alas ! 'tis not for me :  
 Bewitch'd I sure must be,  
 To lose in grieving all my maiden prime.

130

135

Come then, Sorrow,  
 Sweetest Sorrow !  
 Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast :  
 I thought to leave thee,  
 And deceive thee,  
 But now of all the world I love thee best  
 There is not one,  
 No, no, not one  
 But thee to comfort a poor lonely maid ;  
 Thou art her mother,  
 And her brother,  
 Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade.

140

145

This song is another extract from *Endymion* (Book IV). It is sung by a young Indian maiden who fascinates Endymion and gives rise to a conflict in his mind between his love for her and his love for the moon-goddess. (Finally, of course, he discovers that the Indian maiden and the moon-goddess are one and the same person.)

In this song, the Indian maiden tells Endymion the story of her life.

In the first thirty-six lines of the song, the Indian maiden addresses Sorrow (which is personified).. The maiden asks Sorrow why she takes away the natural glow of health from red lips in order to pass it on to roses, why she takes away the lustre from the eyes of human beings in order to pass it on to glow-worms, why she takes away the power of song from human beings in order to pass it on to nightingales, and why she takes away the lightness of heart from lovers who never do any injury to the flowers which are sacred to her. In other words, the Indian maiden wants to know the reason why Sorrow afflicts human beings.

Lines 37—127 contain an account of the maiden's past life and her adventures. She has tried to bid farewell to Sorrow, but Sorrow would not leave her. Sitting alone and sorrowful under a palm tree by the riverside, the maiden was shedding tears like a woman who has been deserted by a mysterious lover, when she heard the noise of revelry. The maiden then goes on to give a description of Bacchus\* and the multitude of his followers. The revellers were blowing their trumpets and sounding their cymbals. Their faces were flushed with wine and they were dancing madly through the valley. Young Bacchus stood aloft in his car, playing with his ivy-twined staff, with his plump white arms damp with crimson wine. By his side rode his foster-father, Silenus, on his ass, heavily drunk, and yet drinking more wine. The maiden asked the Bacchantes† why they had left their homes and their comfortable life, and they replied that they had joined the followers of Bacchus and would accompany them on their journey through various lands. Then she asked the jolly-looking Satyrs why they had left their forest-abodes and their kernel trees, and they replied that they had left their abodes and kernel trees in order to follow Bacchus for the sake of wine. The Satyrs as well as the Bacchantes invited the Indian maiden to join their procession, and the Indian maiden agreed.

Over streams and mountains Bacchus and his followers travelled, riding upon tigers, leopards, zebras, horses, alligators, crocodiles, panthers, and lions, passing kingdom after kingdom at a swift speed. The rulers and the people of Egypt, Abyssinia, Tartary, and India bowed to Bacchus and paid their homage to him. The great Indian god Brahma, and the priests of Brahma, shook at the power of Bacchus and the conquering power of his wine. Ultimately, however, the Indian maiden felt tired and sick-hearted and she strayed away into a forest all alone.

In lines 128—145, the Indian maiden bemoans her hapless condition. She has wandered in search of pleasure through every land, but pleasure is not for her. Her only companion

\*Bacchus—god of wine and of those who drink wine.

†Bacchantes—female followers of Bacchus; Maenads.

sweet Sorrow whom she must nurse on her breast like her own baby. She had tried to leave Sorrow, but now she finds that Sorrow is her only companion, that Sorrow is her mother, her brother, her playmate and her wooer.

The most remarkable quality of the *Ode to Sorrow* is the pathos of its opening and closing lines. We really feel touched by the fate of human beings who are afflicted by Sorrow and who are deprived of their natural glow of health, the lustre of their eyes, and the lightness of their hearts. The closing lines of the poem are especially poignant. Addressing Sorrow, the Indian maiden says :

There is not one,  
No, no, not one  
But thee to comfort a poor lonely maid ;  
Thou art her mother,  
And her brother,  
Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade.

Keats's sensuousness finds expression in his description of Bacchus and the crowd of his followers :

Like to a moving vintage down they came,  
Crown'd with green leaves, and faces all on flame ;  
All madly dancing through the pleasant valley.  
To scare thee, Melancholy !

The vividness of description in the poem is also to be noted. Particularly striking is the description of Bacchus standing aloft in his car, Silenus riding on his ass, tipsily drinking wine, and the various animals and beasts on whom the followers of Bacchus are riding. The submission of the peoples of various lands to Bacchus who conquers all is also described effectively :

Great Brahma from his mystic heaven groans,  
And all his priesthood moans,  
Before young Bacchus' eye-wink turning pale.

The description of Bacchus and his followers is based upon a painting by Titian, which Keats saw in the National Gallery, a painting which depicts a glowing scene, full of colour and strong sunshine, and crowded with figures in action.

Commenting on the lyrical quality of this ode, Sidney Colvin says : "Keats's later and more famous lyrics, though they are free from the faults and immaturities which disfigure this, yet do not, to my mind at least, show a command over such various sources of imaginative and musical effects, or touch so thrillingly so many chords of the spirit. A mood of tender irony and wistful pathos like that of the best Elizabethan love-songs ; a sense as keen as Heine's of the immemorial romance of India and the East ; a power like that of Coleridge ; and perhaps partly caught from him, of evoking the remote, weird and beautiful associations almost with a word ; clear visions of Greek beauty and wild wood-notes of Celtic imagination ;

all these elements come here commingled, yet in a strain perfectly individual. Keats calls the piece a 'roundelay'—a form which it only so far resembles that its opening measures are repeated at the close. It begins with a tender invocation to Sorrow, and then with a first change of movement conjures up the image of a deserted maidenhood beside Indian streams ; till suddenly, with another change, comes the irruption of the Asian Bacchus on his march ; next follows the detailed picture of the god and of his rout, suggested in part by the famous Titian at the National Gallery, and then arranged as if for music, the challenge of the maiden to the Maenads and Satyrs, and their choral answers ; and finally, returning to the opening motive, the lyric ends as it began with an exquisite strain of love-lorn pathos."

"The metrical harmonies of this ode are rich and varied, the central passage being especially fine."

## 6. TO DIANA

- Who, who from Dian's feast would be away ?  
For all the golden bowers of the day  
Are empty left ? Who, who away would be  
From Cynthia's wedding and festivity ?  
Not Hesperus : lo ! upon his silver wings  
He leans away for highest heaven and sings,  
Snapping his lucid fingers merrily !—  
Ah, Zephyrus ! art here, and Flora too ?  
Ye tender bibbers of the rain and dew,  
Young playmates of the rose and daffodil,  
Be careful, ere ye enter in, to fill  
Your baskets high  
With fennel green, and balm, and golden pines,  
Savory, latter-mint, and columbines,  
Cool parsley, basil sweet, and sunny thyme ;  
Yea, every flower and leaf of every clime,  
All gather'd in the dewy morning : hie  
Away ! fly, fly !—  
Crystalline brother of the belt of heaven,  
Aquarius ! to whom king Jove has given  
Two liquid pulse streams 'stead of feather'd wings,  
Two fanlike fountains,—thine illuminings  
For Dian play :  
Dissolve the frozen purity of air ;  
Let thy white shoulders silvery and bare  
Show cold through watery pinions ; make more bright  
The Star-Queen's crescent on her marriage night :  
Haste, haste away !  
Castor has tamed the planet Lion, see !  
And of the Bear has Pollux mastery :  
.

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- A third is in the race ! who is the third,  
Speeding away swift as the eagle bird ?  
The ramping Centaur !  
The Lion's mane's on end : the Bear how fierce !  
The Centaur's arrow ready seems to pierce  
Some enemy : far forth his bow is bent  
Into the blue of heaven. He'll be shent,  
Pale unrelentor,  
When he shall hear the wedding lutes a-playing.—  
Andromeda ! sweet woman ! why delaying  
So timidly among the stars : come hither !  
Join this bright throng, and nimbly follow wither  
They all are going.  
Danae's Son, before Jove newly bow'd,  
Has wept for thee, calling to Jove aloud.  
Thee, gentle lady, did he disenthral :  
Ye shall for ever live and love, for all  
Thy tears are flowing.—  
By Daphne's fright, behold Apollo !

The *Hymn to Diana*, which occurs in Book IV of *Endymion*, is sung by all the friendly gods and spirits of earth and air and sea in honour of the approaching marriage of Endymion with Diana. It is thus a nuptial ode. The singers are various mythological personalities, including several of those who represent the signs of the Zodiac. (Endymion himself does not hear this song. In fact, he is not aware at this stage that he and Diana are going to be united. Diana is, of course, the moon-goddess whom Endymion has been seeking. Cynthia is another name for her.)

No denizen of heaven, say the singers, can miss Diana's wedding-feast. The golden abodes of gods and goddesses are empty because all the divinities have gone to attend her feast. Indeed none of them would like to be absent from Diana's marriage festivities. Hesperus cannot be absent. Zephyrus and Flora, who are fond of drinking rain and dew-drops and who are playmates of roses and daffodils, have already arrived with their baskets full of many fragrant herbs, flowers and leaves of every land. Aquarius, the "crystalline brother of the belt of heaven," will lend additional light to the moon's crescent on the occasion of this marriage. The constellations that belong to the lunar signs have tamed or overcome those that belong to the solar signs, in honour of the wedding of Diana. Castor has tamed Lion, and Pollux has overcome the Bear. The Centaur, who is getting ready to fight, will also be defeated when he hears the wedding music. Why is the sweet woman, Andromeda, taking so long to arrive at the feast? Her lover, Perseus, is missing her greatly.

There is some excellent imagery in the *Hymn to Diana*. The description of Zephyrus and Flora with their baskets full of fragrant herbs and flowers and leaves "of every clime" possesses a rich sensuous appeal. Similarly the "illuminings" of Aquarius lend a radiance to the poem. The poem offers some difficulty to the average reader because of its numerous classical allusions and because of the several mythological-astronomical names that are used in the poem. But once the allusions are understood, the poem acquires a rich appeal and should afford great pleasure to the reader. Verbal felicities are not lacking in the poem and these add to its beauty.

## 7. ON A LOCK OF MILTON'S HAIR

Chief of organic numbers !  
 Old Scholar of the Spheres !  
 Thy spirit never slumbers,  
 But rolls about our ears  
 For ever and for ever !  
 O what a mad endeavour

5

Worketh He,  
 Who to thy sacred and ennobled hearse  
 Would offer a burnt sacrifice of verse  
 And melody !

10

How heavenward thou soundest !  
 Live Temple of sweet noise,  
 And Discord unconfundest,  
 Giving Delight new joys,  
 And Pleasure nobler pinions :  
 O where are thy dominions ?

15

Lend thine ear  
 To a young Delian oath—ay, by the soul,  
 By all that from thy mortal lips did roll,  
 And by the kernel of thine earthly love,  
 Beauty, in things on earth and things above,  
 I swear !

20

When every childish fashion  
 Has vanished from my rhyme,  
 Will I, grey gone in passion,  
 Leave to an after-time  
 Hymning and Harmony

25

Of thee and of thy works, and of thy life ;  
 But vain is now the burning and the strife ;  
 Pangs are in vain, until I grow high-rife  
 With old Philosophy.  
 And mad with glimpses of futurity.

30

•For many years my offerings must be hush'd ;  
 When I do speak, I'll think upon this hour,  
 Because I feel my forehead hot and flushed,  
 Even at the simplest vassal of the power,

35

A lock of thy bright hair,—  
 Sudden it came,

And I was startled when I caught thy name  
 Coupled so unaware ;

40

Yet at the moment temperate was my blood—  
 I thought I had beheld it from the flood !

Keats wrote this poem after seeing, at a friend's house, a lock of hair which was believed to be Milton's. He addresses Milton as the chief of poets having command over harmonious verse, and as a scholar who wrote the great epic (*Paradise Lost*), the scene of which is laid partly in heaven and hell. To try to pay a tribute to the greatness of Milton would be a vain endeavour, says Keats. Keats admires Milton for having written poetry which, by blending discords into harmony, gives a new kind of joy to the readers. Keats then goes on to take an oath by what Milton loved most, namely, beauty as revealed both in heavenly and in earthly things. He swears that, when he has shed his immaturities and achieved the ripeness of his intellectual faculties, he would write a hymn to celebrate the works and life of Milton. To try to do that now would be vain because he is not as yet fit for the task. But when, after many years of apprenticeship, he does write about the great achievement of Milton, he would think of this hour when he saw, and was thrilled by, a lock of Milton's bright hair. In other words, Keats "looks forward to the calming influence of years, and to a training of the intellect through a study of philosophy, to fit him for his career."

This poem is remarkable for Keats's feeling of humility combined with a consciousness of his poetic gift. The poem also shows Keats's reverence for Milton and his deep admiration for Milton's work. We notice here, as in other poems of Keats a characteristic felicity of word and phrase of which the following lines are an example :

But vain is now the burning and the strife ;  
 Pangs are in vain, until I grow high-rise  
 With old Philosophy,  
 And mad with glimpses of futurity.

### 8. TO MAIA (FRAGMENT)

Mother of Hermes ! and still youthful Maia !  
 May I sing to thee  
 As thou wast hymned on the shores of Baiae ?  
 Or may I woo thee ?

In earlier Sicilian ? or thy smiles  
 Seek as they once were sought, in Grecian isles,  
 By bards who died content on pleasant sward,  
 Leaving great verse unto a little clan ?  
 O, give me their old vigour, and unheard  
 Save of the quiet primrose, and the span  
 Of heaven, and few ears,  
 Rounded by thee, my song should die away  
 Content as theirs,  
 Rich in the simple worship of a day.

• 5.  
10.

Maia was the mother of Hermes or Mercury by Jupiter. She, with her six sisters, was raised to the dignity of a constellation known as the "Pleiades". In other words, she and her six sisters were changed into a group of stars called the "Pleiades". The Romans believed that the month of May had been named after her. Keats wrote this ode to her on May-day. He says that he would like to sing to Maia in the manner in which the ancient Roman and Greek poets sang to her. Greek poets, like Theocritus, wrote in their local dialects because they wrote their poems not for a great nation but each for his own "clan" or city. Keats would likewise write his poems not with a desire to achieve immortal fame but merely to obtain the approval of his countrymen in his own time. The audience for his poems would consist of the quiet primroses, a stretch of the sky, and a few people of his own time. His poems would be "rich in the simple worship of a day", and he would not mind if they were soon forgotten.

Here is Selincourt's comment on this fragment of a poem : "It blends with subtle art two sources of the poet's happiest inspiration—the spirit of Greece as he understood it, and the peaceful beauty of Nature. And, as is often the case, the whole essence of the poem seems to pass into the exquisite use of the commonest words. The epithet 'old' is rarely used by Keats without some sense of yearning after the beauty and the glory of primeval life." (The word 'old' occurs in line 9 of the poem).

#### 9. ON THE MERMAID TAVERN

Souls of poets dead and gone,  
 What Elysium have ye known,  
 Happy field or mossy cavern,  
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern ?  
 Have ye tippled drink more fine ?  
 Than mine host's Canary wine ?  
 Or are fruits of Paradise  
 Sweeter than those dainty pies  
 Of venison ? O generous food !  
 Drest as though bold Robin Hood  
 Would, with his maid Marian,  
 Sup and bowse from horn and can.

10.

I have heard that on a day  
 Mine host's sign-board flew away,  
 Nobody knew whither, till  
 An astrologer's old quill  
 To a sheepskin gave the story,—  
 Said he saw you in your glory,  
 Underneath a new-old sign  
 Sipping beverage divine,  
 And pledging with contented smack  
 The Mermaid in the Zodiac.

15

20

Souls of poets dead and gone,  
 What Elysium have ye known,  
 Happy field or mossy cavern,  
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern ?

25

The Mermaid Tavern was situated in London and was called by this name because its signboard had the figure of a mermaid painted on it. (It was customary for every tavern to have its own distinctive sign.) In this tavern, Sir Walter Raleigh instituted "The Mermaid Club" which became famous as the meeting-place of Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Carew, and other poets and wits. Keats in his poem pays a tribute to this tavern where well-known Elizabethan poets used to gather, eat, drink, and exchange pleasantries. He wonders whether the souls of those poets and dramatists can get in their heavenly abodes the same food, drink and entertainment which they used to get in The Mermaid Tavern when they were alive on earth. Keats is all praise for the Canary wine and the delicious pies of venison which the owner of The Mermaid Tavern used to serve to them. The food and drinks served by this tavern were fit for the palates of Robin Hood and maid Marian. Legend has it that on a certain day the signboard of The Mermaid Tavern disappeared. An astrologer subsequently explained that the "sign" of the tavern had flown to heaven and been changed into Virgo, a sign of the Zodiac.\* The souls of the dead Elizabethan poets and dramatists were now able to sip divine drinks and eat celestial foods under the old sign which had taken a new shape (or, under, the old sign which had now appeared in new surroundings).

This poem is a mere trifle written in a light-hearted mood with no serious intention. The idea merely is to celebrate a tavern where the great Elizabethan poets who were its patrons used to assemble to enjoy themselves. The references to Robin Hood† and maid Marian

\*There is a play here upon the double meaning of "sign of a tavern" and "sign of the Zodiac", that is, on "Mermaid Tavern" and "Virgo, or the Mermaid". "Virgo" is the name of a constellation which is the sixth sign of the Zodiac.

†Robin Hood was a legendary outlaw who lived, during the reign of Richard I, in Sherwood Forest with maid Marian and with a band of followers.

appear to be forced and have hardly any relevance. The play on the double meaning of the word "sign" is also not a felicitous device.

## 10. TO FANNY

Physician Nature ! let my spirit bleed !  
 O ease my heart of verse and let me rest ;  
 Throw me upon thy Tripod, till the flood  
 Of stifling numbers ebbs from my full breast.  
 A theme ! a theme ! great nature ! give a theme ;      5  
     Let me begin my dream.  
 I come—I see thee, as thou standest there.  
 Beckon me not into the wintry air.

Ah ! dearest love, sweet home of all my fears,  
 And hopes, and joys, and panting miseries,—      10  
 To-night, if I may guess, thy beauty wears  
     A smile of such delight,  
     As brilliant and as bright,  
 As when with ravish'd, aching, vassal eyes,  
     Lost in soft amaze,      15  
     I gaze, I gaze !

Who now, with greedy looks, eats up my feast ?  
 What stare outfaces now my silver moon ?  
 Ah ! keep that hand unravish'd at the least ;  
     Let, let, the amorous burn—      20  
     But, pr'ythee, do not turn  
 The current of your heart from me so soon.  
     O ! save, in charity,  
     The quickest pulse for me.

Save it for me, sweet love ! though music breathe      25  
 Voluptuous visions into the warm air,  
 Though swimming through the dance's dangerous wreath ;  
     Be like an April day,  
     Smiling and cold and gay,  
 A temperate lily, temperate as fair ;      30  
     Then, Heaven ! there will be  
     A warmer June for me.

Why, this—you'll say, my Fanny ! is not true :  
 Put your soft hand upon your snowy side,  
 Where the heart beats : confess—'tis nothing ne'      35  
     Must not a woman be  
     A feather on the sea,  
 Sway'd to and fro by every wind and tide ?  
     Of as uncertain speed  
     As blow-ball from the mead ?      40

I know it—and to know it is despair  
 To one who loves you as I love, sweet Fanny !  
 Whose heart goes flutt'ring for you everywhere,  
 Nor, when away you roam,  
 Dare keep its wretched home.  
 Love, love alone, has pains severe and many :  
 Then, loveliest ! keep me free,  
 From torturing jealousy.

45.

Ah ! if you prize my subdued soul above  
 The poor, the fading, brief pride of an hour ;  
 Let none profane my Holy See of love,  
 Or with a rude hand break  
 The sacramental cake :  
 Let none else touch the just new-budded flower ;  
 If not—may my eyes close,  
 Love ! on their last repose.

50.

55.

This ode gives expression to Keats's desperate passion for Fanny and his feeling of jealousy on seeing her approached by other admirers. "The secret violence of Keats's passion, and the restless physical jealousy which accompanied it, betray themselves in the verses addressed *To Fanny*. They are written very unequally, but with his true and brilliant felicity of touch here and there." —(Sidney Colvin).

The poem opens with Keats's appeal to Nature to provide him with a theme on which he can write a poem and thus relieve his heart of the feelings which stifle and suffocate him. This appeal is followed by an address to Fanny who is described sentimentally as the "sweet home of all my fears, and hopes, and joys, and panting miseries." Her beauty is especially ravishing on this particular night. (It was the night of a dance attended by Fanny and she looked strikingly beautiful to the poet on that occasion.) Fanny, says the poet, should be reserved for him. The amorous admirers who approach Fanny should receive no attention from her and should not be allowed even to touch her hand. He would like Fanny to save her quickest heart-throb for him, out of a spirit of charity if not out of a feeling of love. He would like her to remain cold when she is dancing with her amorous admirers and even when voluptuous music is playing. If she remains cold towards her other admirers, it will be possible for her to feel passionate towards him.

But having made this appeal, the poet is assailed by doubts. After all, a woman is inconstant ; she is like a feather which floats on the sea and which is swayed to and fro by every wind. This feeling of a woman's inconstancy fills the poet with despair. He entreats Fanny to keep him free from torturing jealousy. If she has the least affection for him, and if she does not treat him merely as an unworthy lover who feeds her vanity, she should not allow anybody to

touch her and thus profane her. If Fanny does not comply with his request, he would like to die.

The best comment on this poem is as follows : "There are some fine passages, and others of poor quality, and the workmanship is rather careless throughout." One of the fine passages is that in which the poet appeals to Fanny to adopt a cold attitude towards her other admirers when she is dancing with them :

Save it for me, sweet love ! though music breathe  
Voluptuous visions into the warm air,  
Though swimming through the dance's dangerous wreath ;  
Be like an April day,  
Smiling and cold and gay,  
A temperate lily, temperate as fair ;  
Then, Heaven ! there will be  
A warmer June for me.

These lines contain a couple of excellent figures of speech and show a felicity of word and phrase.

\* On the whole, the poem betrays a weakness of character on the part of Keats and shows him as a frustrated lover begging his callous mistress for pity. The poem certainly does not raise the image of Keats in our estimation.

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## 17.

*Important Passages from  
Keats's Letters*

"I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of imagination.—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love : they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.....The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it tru~~wi~~. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth : by consequetive reasoning.....However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts !" (November 22, 1817).

"We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its comments in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.—How beautiful are the retired flowers ! How they would lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, 'Admire me I am a violet'. 'Dote on me I am a primrose !'" (February 3, 1818).

"In poetry I have a few axioms. First, I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity.' It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thought, and appear almost a remembrance. Second, its touches of Beauty should never half-way, thereby making the reader breathless instead of content.....But it is easier to think what poetry should be than to write it—and this leads me on to another axiom. That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all....." (February 27, 1818).

"Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without

comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict, and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary re-perception and ratification of what is fine. J. S. is perfectly right in regard to the slip-shod *Endymion*.....In *Endymion*, I leapt headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.—I was never afraid of failure, for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest.” (October 8, 1818)

“A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence ; because he has no identity—he is continually in for ‘informing’, perhaps—and filling some other body. The sun, the moon, the sea and men and women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute. The poet has none ; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of God’s creatures.” (October 27, 1818).

“Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, whirlpools and volcanoes. Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly happiness. The point at which man may arrive is as far as the parallel state in inanimate nature and no further. For instance, suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning, it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun ; it cannot escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances : they are as native to the world as itself ; no more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature.....Call the world if you please ‘The Vale of Soul-making’.” (May, 1819)

## *Important Questions*

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1. Write an essay on the imagery of Keats (or, on Keats's pictorial quality).
2. Write a critical note on Keats's sensuousness, illustrating it with reference to the poems which you have read.
3. Do you consider Keats to be an escapist poet? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Write a note on Keats's aestheticism.
5. Matthew Arnold said, "Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous: the question with some people will be whether he is anything else." Say, to what extent you agree or disagree with this statement.
6. What is meant by the remark that "in his use of language, Keats is Shakespearean"?
7. Consider, with suitable illustrations, the felicities of word and phrase in the work of Keats.
8. Examine Keats's preoccupation with beauty in the light of the poems you have read.
9. What are the qualities of Keats's poetry that account for its continued appeal to the modern reader? Illustrate your answer.
10. Write a critical note on Keats's poetical development.
11. Discuss Keats's treatment of Nature in his poetry with special reference to the odes.
12. Examine the following statement about Keats: "Just as each ode is something in the nature of a sonnet-sequence so the odes, taken together, are a sequence, an ode-sequence of which the relations, not of time, but of mood disclose themselves."

(Garrod)

13. "Poetry, as it came to him (Keats), was not a spiritual vision, as with Wordsworth, but a joy wrought out of sensation." Discuss and amplify.
14. Do you agree with the statement that the odes of Keats are all of a piece, and that the best way to understand them is to make them interpret each other?
15. "The ode, as the six great odes illustrate it, develops with Keats, not from the ode or hymn of the eighteenth century, but from a species the eighteenth century despised, the sonnet." Discuss and amplify.
16. Comment on the quality of Keats's achievement in the odes in the light of this observation : "These poems (the odes) are different in kind from their predecessors ; while the earlier ones were merely decorative, these are tragic."
17. Briefly explain and analyse how his odes represent the apex of Keats's poetic art.
18. If Keats's development may be said to mark a drift from romantic egocentricity towards objectivity, what place is occupied by his odes in this scheme of poetic development?
19. "With the great odes, we are probably at the apex of Keats's poetic power." Trace the evolution of Keats's art up to his achievement in the odes.
20. Write an essay on the treatment of the theme of the 'mystery of sorrow' in Keats's poetry.
21. Passion, precision and music have been called the three essentials of poetry. Examine one of Keats's major odes to show how far it combines them all.
22. Comment on the following : "In the *Ode To A Nightingale*, Keats portrays a state of intense aesthetic and imaginative feeling, too poignant for long duration, which arises with the song of a bird and vanishes when the song is done." What do you consider to be the theme of the *Ode To A Nightingale*? How does Keats work it out?
23. The main subject of the *Ode On A Grecian Urn* is the creative ecstasy which the artist perpetuates in a masterpiece. Discuss this view.
24. How far does the *Ode On A Grecian Urn* provide a perception into reality?
25. Elucidate the view that in the *Nightingale* and the *Grecian Urn* odes Keats feels not so much the joy of imaginative experience as the painful antithesis between transient sensation and enduring art.
26. Comment on the mood expressed in Keats's *Ode To Autumn* in relation to the foregoing odes by him.

*Or*

Comment on the meaning and significance of Keats's *Ode To Autumn* in relation to his other odes.

27. Bring out clearly the main idea of the *Ode On Melancholy* and bring out the principal merits of the poem.
28. Write a critical appreciation of the *Ode To Psyche*.
29. Examine the mood of the poet in the *Ode On Indolence*.
30. "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty." Explain and comment upon this proposition.
31. Through the odes of Keats there runs a troubled consideration of the relation of poetry to reality. Elucidate.
32. "The odes of Keats reflect his persistent endeavour to look for something beautiful and permanent in a transient world." Discuss and illustrate.
33. The great odes of Keats stand alone in literature, new in form and spirit and owing nothing to any predecessor. Discuss.
34. The odes of Keats show an equal balance of form and expression. Discuss.
35. Write a critical note on the odes of Keats.
36. Explain clearly the conception behind Keats's *Hyperion*, and bring out the differences between the two versions of the poem.
37. It is said that *Hyperion* failed as epic because Keats lacked the epical imagination and could not work out a plan of action to express what he most deeply believed. Do you agree ?
38. "To make this much-loved earth more lovely" was one of the aims of Keats. How far did he succeed in achieving this end in his poetry ?
39. Keats longed for "a life of sensations rather than of thoughts". Show in what way his poems are a fulfilment of this longing.
40. In the *Ode On Melancholy* and the *Ode To Autumn* Keats returns to ordinary human experience and to the problem of human happiness in life. Discuss.

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